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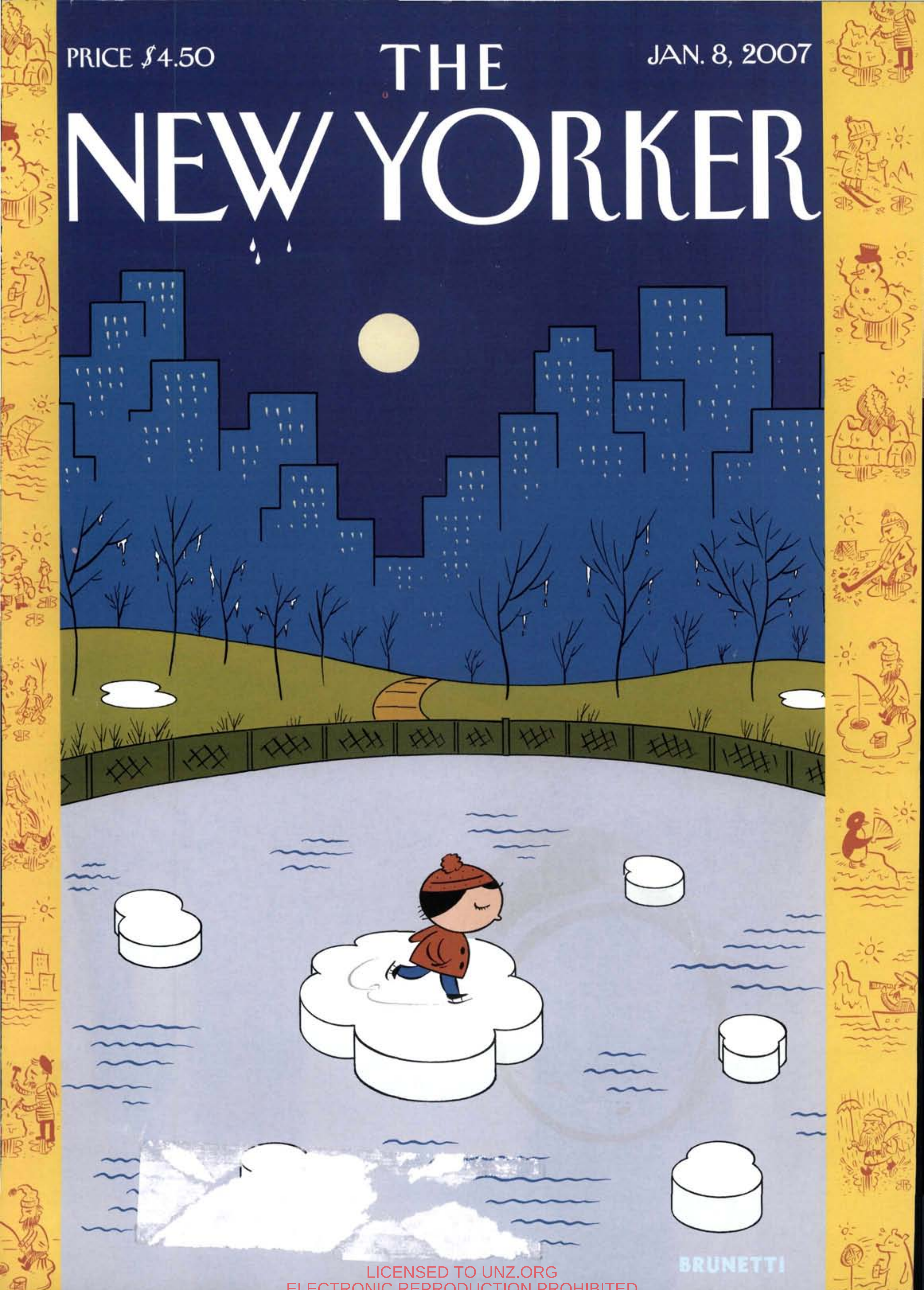
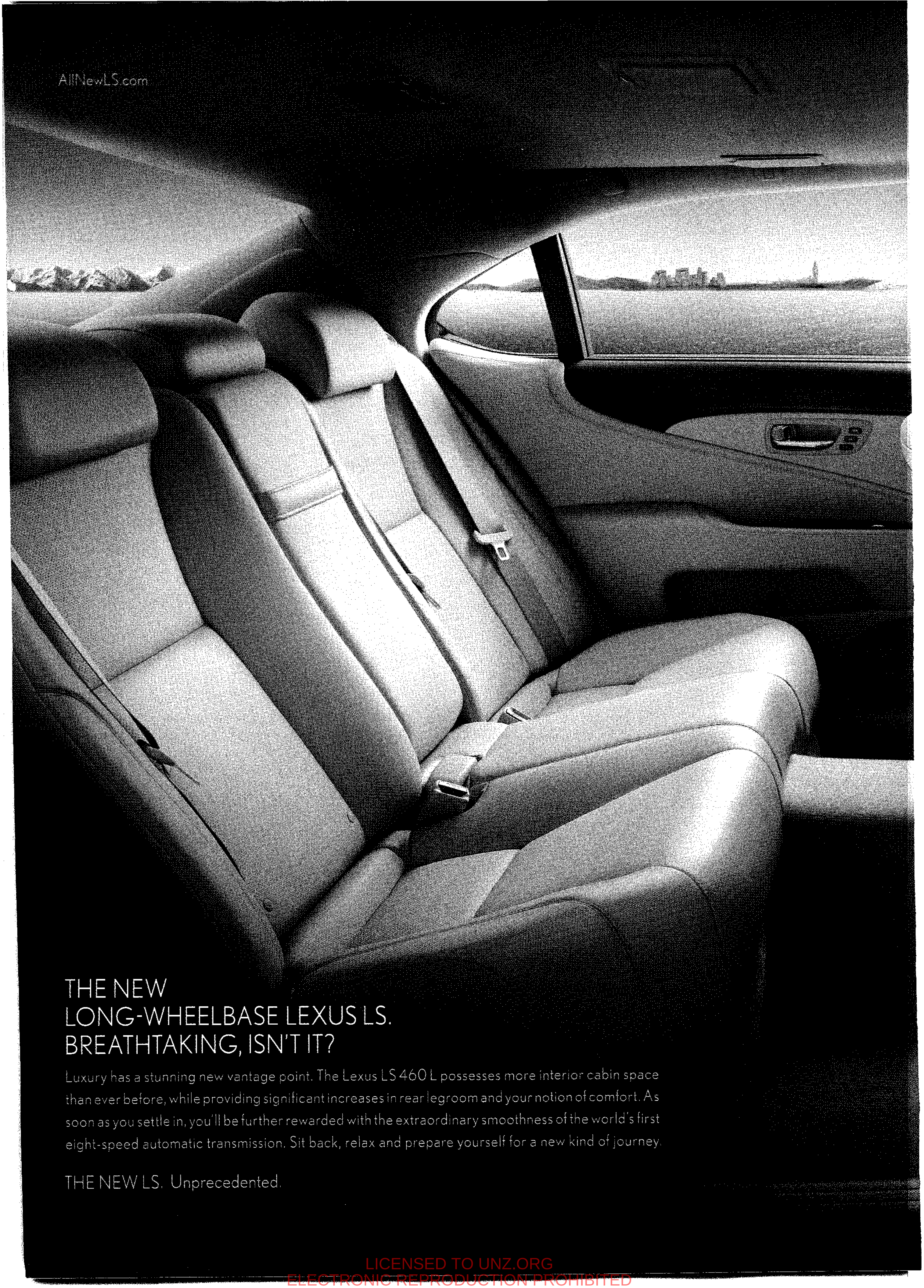
JAN. 8, 2007





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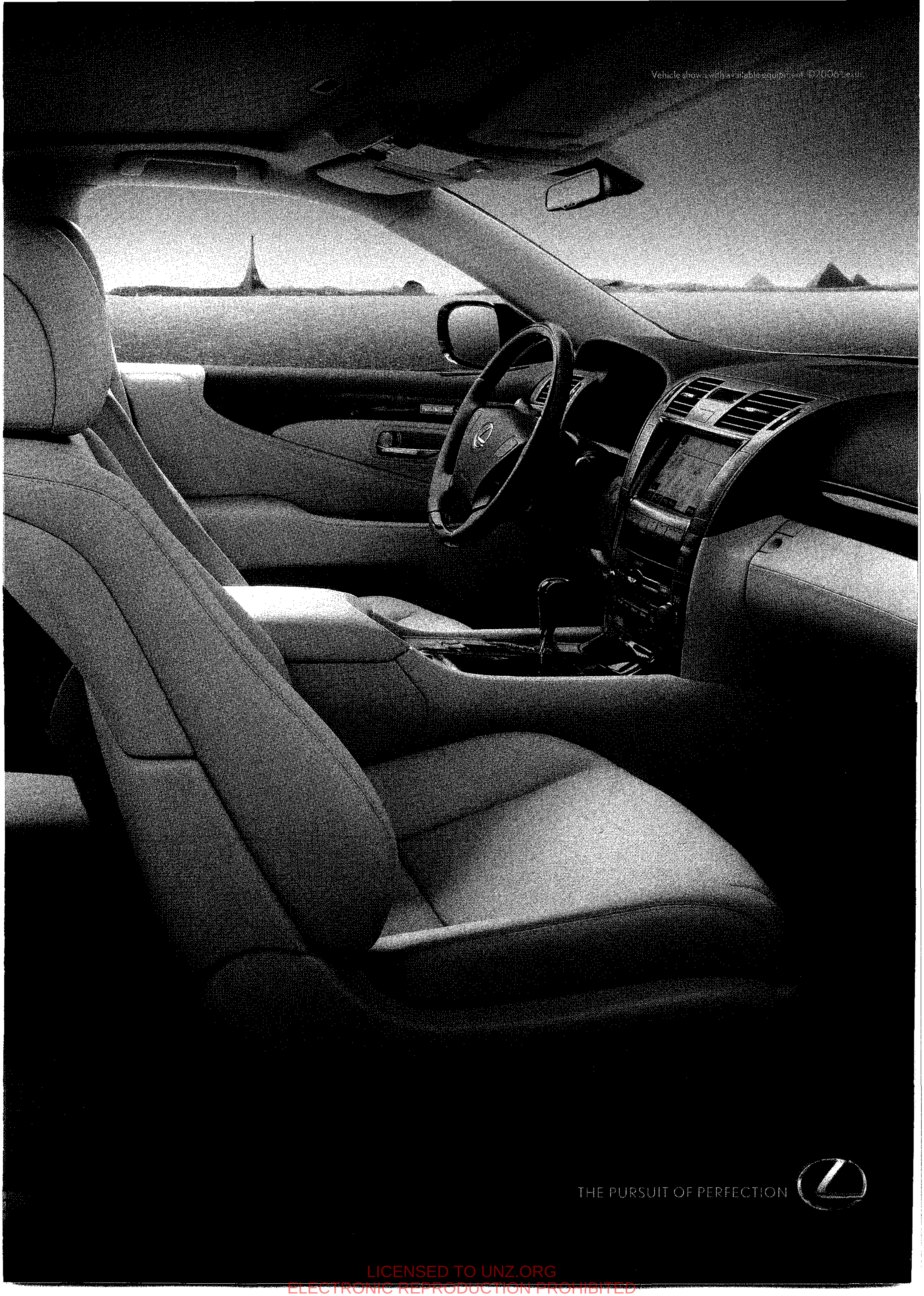
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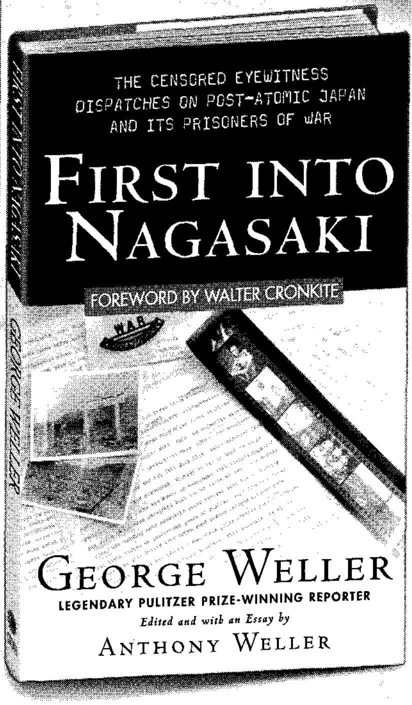
FIRST INTO NAGASAKI
GEORGE WELLER
THE CENSORED EYEWITNESS DISPATCHES ON POST-ATOMIC JAPAN AND ITS PRISONERS OF WAR
FIRST INTO NAGASAKI
FOREWORD BY WALTER CRONKITE
GEORGE WELLER
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"A Year About Town"
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CONTRIBUTORS

Adam Gopnik (Comment, p. 21; "The Unbeautiful Game," p. 38) is the author of three books, including, most recently, "Through the Children's Gate: A Home in New York."

Ian Frazier (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 36) has a collection of humor essays coming out in the fall.

Milan Kundera ("Die Weltliteratur," p. 28) is a novelist and essayist. His new book of essays, "The Curtain," is due out in February.

Malcolm Gladwell ("Open Secrets," p. 44) is a staff writer and the author of "The Tipping Point" and "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking."

James Surowiecki (The Financial Page, p. 26) writes about business and finance. His book "The Wisdom of Crowds" is out in paperback.

Rebecca Mead (The Talk of the Town, p. 25) is a staff writer.

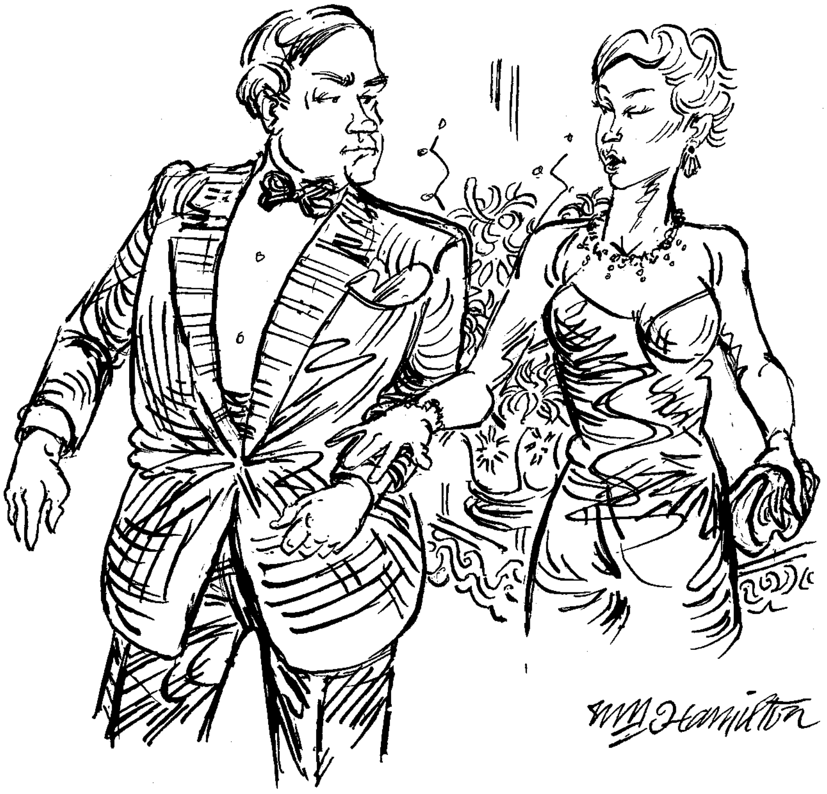
David Denby ("Big Pictures," p. 54), a film critic for the magazine, is the author of "Great Books" and "American Sucker."

Marvin Bell (Poem, p. 49) will publish his eighteenth collection of poems, "Mars Being Red," in the spring.

Primo Levi (Fiction, p. 64), who died in 1987, wrote fiction, poetry, and memoirs, including "Survival in Auschwitz." A book of previously untranslated stories, "A Tranquil Star," will be published in April. This story originally appeared in Italian in 1961.

Joan Acocella (Books, p. 70) has a collection of essays, "Twenty-eight Artists and Two Saints," coming out in February.

Jessica Fisher (Poem, p. 72) won the Yale Younger Poets prize this year for "Frail-Craft," her first collection of poems, which will be published in April. ♦



"Try to remember not to mention his obscene bonus."

THE MAIL

NIGHT FALLS FAST

Elizabeth Kolbert, in her essay on children's literature, detects a disquieting theme of mortality in the book "Goodnight Moon," as the clocks' hands inch forward on each page and the bunny tries to forestall the inevitable with a litany of "good night"s (A Critic at Large, December 4th). When I read that story to my daughter, I recalled Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," first produced about a decade before the publication of Margaret Wise Brown's book. Wilder's character Emily Webb, on furlough from the grave, bids farewell to life by saying goodbye to an inventory of the daily pleasures she will never enjoy again: new-ironed dresses, Mama's sunflowers, hot baths, clocks ticking, and sleeping and waking up. Whether Brown intended to parody Wilder or to pay tribute, the echoes are unmistakable.

Marcia E. Vetrocq
New York City

INDEFINITE DETENTION

Jeffrey Toobin, in his piece on Arlen Specter, implies that Abraham Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus in Maryland in April, 1861, enabled the arrest of political foes in that state ("Killing Habeas Corpus," December 4th). Habeas corpus was actually suspended in a very narrow manner. Railroad lines north of Baltimore had been destroyed during widespread civil unrest, and the President's initial order applied only to arrests along the railway lines. Lincoln specifically ordered the military not to interfere with a special session of the state legislature; his restraint was rewarded when the lawmakers took no action on the subject of secession. Baltimore's mayor and chief of police were arrested, but months afterward—in the mayor's case, on evidence that he had ordered the destruction of railroad bridges.

Charles W. Mitchell
Lutherville, Md.

Toobin's profile reveals that Specter labors under a misapprehension regarding potential judicial review of the Military Commissions Act of 2006. Specter states that the act contains a severability clause, and that, therefore, excision of the controversial habeas provision would have no implications for the rest of the act. In fact, the statute contains no such clause, and, if the Supreme Court were to strike down any part of the statute, it would have to consider whether the rest of the act could survive the loss. Since legislative history shows that the severability clause was removed during consideration of the bill, it would be very difficult for the Court to find legislative intent supporting it.

A. Michael Froomkin, Professor
Stephen I. Vladeck, Associate Professor
University of Miami School of Law
Coral Gables, Fla.

ALIEN NATION

William Finnegan, in writing about the community of Somalis in Lewiston, Maine, quotes Alex Nicolaou, an employment counsellor, as saying that discrimination accounts for some of the difficulty these immigrants may face in finding employment ("New in Town," December 11th). It would be naïve to believe that discrimination never occurs, but employability for many Somali adults in Lewiston has much more to do with the limited inventory of low-skill jobs, which often serve as the first employment opportunity for those who speak little English. Our newly diversified economy—no longer that of an "old mill town"—has produced low rates of unemployment for several years. However, this rising tide of higher-skill jobs has left many immigrant residents behind. Much more needs to be done to equip them so that they can compete.

Phil Nadeau
Deputy City Administrator
Lewiston, Me.

•

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Preparing puppets for the Three Kings Day Parade, at the Museo del Barrio. Photograph by Gus Powell.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
7	8	9	3	4	5	6

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
DOUBLING UP

Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare had much in common, including iconic Jewish villains: Shylock from "The Merchant of Venice" and Barabas from "The Jew of Malta." Beginning this month, F. Murray Abraham will play both parts in repertory. (See page 10.)

NIGHT LIFE
STRING THEORY

Gary Lucas, the thinking man's guitar hero, spent time in Taipei when he was young, went on to back Captain Beefheart, and has had a solo career that embraces the avant-garde and alternative rock in equal measures. His band Gods and Monsters plays slightly psychedelic rock with an edge of Americana, and he brings them to the Bowery Poetry Club for an early-January workout. (See page 11.)

ART
PRIMARY WIN

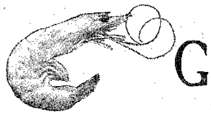
The American painter Robert Irwin's new installation at the PaceWildenstein gallery in Chelsea borrows its title from and pays homage to Barnett Newman's famous series from the sixties, "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue." The deceptively simple large-scale project is one of the septuagenarian artist's finest works to date. (See page 14.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
POÈME DE L'AMOUR

Leon Botstein and his American Symphony Orchestra come to the rescue of the undervalued group of French composers (including Ernest Chausson and Paul Dukas) who worshipped Richard Wagner and César Franck. (See page 16.)

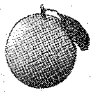
MOVIES
REALITY BITES

The "Critics' Choice" series at Moving Image, which this year is devoted to documentaries, begins with a weekend of classics, including "Winter Soldier," from 1972, in which Vietnam veterans (including, briefly, John Kerry) describe the horrors they witnessed and sometimes perpetrated, and "Hospital," Frederick Wiseman's 1970 study of a New York public hospital. (See page 19.)



Gulf Shrimp From Nebraska?

Valencia Oranges From Maine?



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THE THEATRE OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

ANGRY YOUNG WOMEN IN LOW-RISE JEANS WITH HIGH-CLASS ISSUES
Matt Morillo wrote and directs this comedic exploration of urban women and their vexing contradictions. Opens Jan. 4. (Theatre for the New City, 155 First Ave., at 10th St. 212-868-4444.)

AS YET THOU ART YOUNG AND RASH
Target Margin Theatre begins its season of updated Greek classics with this adaptation of Euripides' war-minded play "Suppliants." David Herskovits directs. Previews begin Jan. 9. (Ohio, 66 Wooster St. 212-352-3101.)

BLACKOUT
In Michael I. Walker's play, presented by the Cell Theatre Company, six strangers meet on a corner in Hell's Kitchen during the 2003 blackout. Previews begin Jan. 6. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE COUNTRY WIFE
A staging of William Wycherley's Restoration comedy, about a womanizer who fakes impotence as a way of gaining access to married society ladies. Previews begin Jan. 5. Opens Jan. 8. (McGinn/Cazale, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 212-352-3101.)

THE FEVER
Wallace Shawn plays a man of privilege who is forced to confront the poverty of the Third World in the New Group's revival of his one-person drama. Scott Elliott directs. Previews begin Jan. 9. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE GERMANS IN PARIS
Jonathan Leaf's new play traces the intersecting lives of Heinrich Heine, Richard Wagner, and Karl Marx in eighteen-forties Paris. Previews begin Jan. 5. Opens Jan. 8. (ArcLight, 152 W. 71st St. 212-352-3101.)

GET YOUR WAR ON
As part of the "Under the Radar" festival, Rude Mechanicals brings David Rees's political comic strip to the stage, in an adaptation by Kirk Lynn. Previews begin Jan. 9. (59E59, 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

IN THE HEIGHTS
The ethnic mix of Washington Heights is the focus of this new musical, with music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda and a book by Quiara Alegria Hudes. Previews begin Jan. 9. (37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-307-4100.)

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE
F. Murray Abraham is Shylock in Theatre for a New Audience's production. Later this month, the play will begin running in alternation with Christopher Marlowe's "The Jew of Malta," with Abraham in the role of Barabas. Previews begin Jan. 6. (Duke, 229 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

NEW YORK GILBERT & SULLIVAN PLAYERS
The company's thirty-third season features two shows in repertory, "The Mikado" and "The Yeomen of the Guard," as well as a one-night-only performance of "The Rose of Persia," which Sullivan wrote with the librettist Basil Hood. Opens Jan. 5. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

PARTY TIME
The Talking Band's play with music, written and directed by Paul Zimet, follows two soldiers who are stuck in the desert under harrowing circumstances. Previews begin Jan. 4. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710.)

PURITY
Thomas Bradshaw considers the issue of internal racism in his newest play, in which one African-American professor berates another for his insufficiently "black" life style. Previews begin Jan. 5. Opens Jan. 8. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101.)

THE RAPTURE PROJECT
Great Small Works offers an absurdist take on religious fundamentalism, featuring live music, marionettes, and a showdown between Satan and the ghost of Susan Sontag. Opens Jan. 4. (HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101.)

THE SCENE
Tony Shalhoub and Patricia Heaton star in Theresa Rebeck's satire about self-absorbed Manhattan partygoers. Directed by Rebecca Taichman. In previews. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

TOYS IN THE ATTIC
A remounting of Lillian Hellman's last major play, about a New Orleans family that comes into a sudden fortune, with undesirable consequences. Austin Pendleton directs. Previews begin Jan. 5. (Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

TRANSLATIONS
Manhattan Theatre Club revives Brian Friel's play from 1980, about an Irish town contending with the forces of cultural imperialism. Garry Hynes directs. Previews begin Jan. 4. (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

The Dutch percussionist Han Bennink shows off his uninhibited ways at Tonic.

JEROEN KOOLHAAS

YOU BELONG TO ME: DEATH OF NATIONS PART V
Josh Fox, the founder of the International WOW Company, directs the fifth installment of his experimental play cycle. This latest chapter imagines the final days of three different wars. Previews begin Jan. 4. Opens Jan. 6. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101.)

NOW PLAYING

THE APPLE TREE
Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's 1966 musical, which has been revived by the Roundabout Theatre Company under the lacklustre direction of Gary Griffin, is a triptych of stories about temptation. The first, and most satisfying, is adapted from Mark Twain's "The Diary of Adam and Eve," whose tender melancholy fun brings out the best in all the collaborators. (Eve is played by Kristin Chenoweth, who owns the Broadway franchise on this particular brand of 4-H Club buoyancy.) But what's fascinating about the show, which was created by two of Broadway's master craftsmen at the height of their powers, is the uncertainty of its tone and its attack. In its storytelling, "The Apple Tree" is stymied: tentative in its humor and unadventurous in its attempt to probe its characters' emotional stakes. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/25/06 & 1/1/07.) (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

THE BIG VOICE: GOD OR MERMAN?
As a child, Jim Brochu wanted to be Pope—until his father brought him to see the original Broadway production of "Gypsy" and he joined the Church of Ethel instead. He met his longtime partner, Steve Schalchlin, at the Fantasy Lounge on the S.S. Galileo, which later sank. Together, the couple has created a small and endearing musical about their relationship and their love of musical theatre, a kind of second honeymoon in song performed with an affecting mixture of sarcasm, mirth, and heart. Schalchlin's music may not linger long in the memory, but the idea that show tunes can substitute for religion will ring true for anyone who found "Godspell" instead of God. (The Actor's Temple, 339 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

A CHRISTMAS CAROL
Sandra Nordgren adapted Dickens's classic tale for this 13th Street Repertory Company production, directed by Esther Neff. (50 W. 13th St. 212-352-3101. Through Jan. 7.)

THE COAST OF UTOPIA, PART ONE: VOYAGE
The first of three plays by Tom Stoppard about a group of nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

THE COAST OF UTOPIA, PART TWO: SHIPWRECK
The second chapter of Tom Stoppard's trilogy. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

CULTUREMART
The seventeen new works in this year's festival, which emphasizes mixed media, draw on such diverse disciplines as dance, video, Kabuki, card playing, and beat-boxing. (HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101. For complete schedule, visit www.here.org.)

HENRY AND MUDGE
Under Peter Flynn's skillful direction, the new children's musical based on Cynthia Rylant's popular "Henry and Mudge" books eschews the Disney treatment in favor of character-driven physical comedy. And what a trio of main characters: adult

actors play the nervous, lonely Henry (Joseph Morales), his hundred-and-eighty-two-pound dog, Mudge (Todd Buonopane), and his feisty cousin, Annie (Jennifer Cody, in a kooky, brilliant turn). Kait Kerrigan's forthright book pulls no punches when it comes to children's (and dogs') feelings, and the songs (by Kerrigan and the composer Brian Lowdermilk) transport the audience still deeper into Henry's childhood world: a sweet, slightly uncertain place, with a scary forest just beyond the picket fence. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

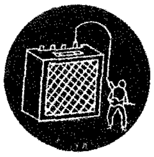
MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS
At the cozy Irish Rep, Charlotte Moore's small-scale revival of the familiar holiday musical feels like it's being performed in someone's parlor by a group of jolly Midwesterners. The adept actors slip into the skins of nineteen-forties M-G-M contract players, radiating wholesomeness, but the tight quarters work against the illusion. The hit songs ("Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "The Trolley Song") fare better than the musty book, whose turn-of-the-century nostalgia is played straight down the middle. Nearly missing here are the psychological undercurrents that made the 1944 Minnelli/Garland film so compelling—and without those contrasting fears and longings, the story is about as one-note as a trolley going clang-clang-clang. (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS
The New Globe Theatre presents Carlo Goldoni's 1745 comedy, in a new adaptation by Anne and Stuart Vaughan. (Theatre 3, at 311 W. 43rd St. 212-279-4200.)

A VERY MERRY UNAUTHORIZED CHILDREN'S SCIENTOLOGY PAGEANT
Les Freres Corbusier's droll fifty-five-minute production, conceived and directed by Alex Timbers, with book, music, and lyrics by Kyle Jarrow, tells the story of the author, explorer, atomic physicist, nautical engineer, and horticulturist L. Ron Hubbard, the founding swami of Dianetics. Beneath a series of play-school arches of pink, yellow, blue, and green, with a castle and a rainbow visible in the background, a cast of ten children, mostly under the age of eleven, tell the tale of the making of Scientology. If the kids were good actors—they're not—the show wouldn't be as funny. But every mispronounced word, every scratched nose, every forgotten line, every wandering eye only adds to the high-camp trivialization of Hubbard and his teachings. (12/25/06 & 1/1/07) (4th Street Theatre, 83 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 7.)

Also Playing

A CHORUS LINE: Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **COMPANY:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **GREY GARDENS:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED:** Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **MARTIN SHORT: FAME BECOMES ME:** Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 7. **MARY POPPINS:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4747. **NO CHILD . . .:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **AN OAK TREE:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **REGRETS ONLY:** City Center, Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **ROOM SERVICE:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **TWO TRAINS RUNNING:** Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. **THE VERTICAL HOUR:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THE VOYSEY INHERITANCE:** Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.



POP NOTES
INSTANT REPLAY

Here are some records released in the past year that deserve a second listen:

Babyshambles, "The Blinding EP" (Regal)—The London musician Pete Doherty has interrupted a series of arrests to release an E.P., which will baffle those who think his main job is smoking crack and dating Kate Moss. On "The Blinding," his band, Babyshambles, sounds like a loose version of the Clash, and Doherty is in mystifyingly good form, a literate and sleepy charmer.

Sibylle Baier, "Colour Green" (Orange Twin)—Between 1970 and 1973, the German singer and actress wrote a series of original songs and recorded herself singing and playing guitar. More than twenty years later, her son used the original tapes to create CDs and gave them out as presents to family members. Now officially released, Baier's plangent, plainspoken songs evoke Nick Drake.

Cheap Trick, "RockFord" (Big3)—The band's last studio record, "Special One," from 2003, sounded great but sometimes came up short on material. "Rockford" solves that problem, and then some. Rick Nielsen's virtuosic guitars and Robin Zander's powerful vocals remain as impressive as they were in 1977, and "O Claire," a moving ballad in the key of Lennon, is the band's best work in years.

The Coup, "Pick a Bigger Weapon" (Epitaph)—In 2001, the Bay Area hip-hop group made headlines when the original cover image of its album "Party Music" showed the band setting off an explosion of the World Trade Center. Last month, the Coup's tour bus crashed, nearly killing artists and crew members. Amid all the drama, the Coup remains one of the rap world's great resources—fearless, fierce, and funny as hell—and the new album is a potent combination of leftist politics, revolutionary humanitarianism, and triumphant funk.

Toumani Diabaté's Symmetric Orchestra, "Boulevard de l'Indépendance" (Nonesuch)—For the past decade, the Malian kora master Diabaté and his band have been performing epically long sets on Fridays at the Hogon Club, in Bamako. This album, which was recorded during two weeks of all-night sessions, captures the highly polished ensemble in its quest to combine contemporary improvisation with the sonic riches of the Mandé empire.

Grizzly Bear, "Yellow House" (Warp)—In 2005, the singer, guitarist, and bandleader Edward Droste moved his band into a house (yes, it's yellow) owned by his mother on Cape Cod, where this album was entirely written and recorded. The music reflects the place of origin. It is full of air and well-worn sounds; flutes and banjos intermingle with guitars and the sweet, ambiguous vocals of Droste and Daniel Rossen.

Jesus H Christ and the Four Hornsmen of the Apocalypse, "Jesus H Christ and the Four Hornsmen of the Apocalypse" (Jesushchristrocks.com)—This self-released album by a local eight-piece band delivers sharply satirical power pop. Risa Mickenberg sings about copulating in Connecticut, exposing one's breasts in hot weather, and the romantic powers of psychotropics, backed by a crusading horn section and some fine guitar playing.

Julie Roberts, "Men & Mascara" (Mercury)—Another year, another criminally neglected Julie Roberts record. What's not to like about a stunning blonde who sings like an old-school honky-tonk diva and gets the best songs from Music Row's professional writers? If you're wondering what the connection between men and mascara is, Roberts will tell you: they always run.

Todd Snider, "The Devil You Know" (New Door)—Snider's last studio record, from 2004, was the superb "East Nashville Skyline," and the follow-up has eleven more tales of misfits, petty criminals, and hopeless romantics. Snider brings craggy charm to whatever he sings, whether a romantic ode ("All That Matters"), a touching tribute to Phil Ochs ("Thin Wild Mercury"), or a blackly hilarious portrait of George W. Bush ("You Got Away with It").

Trentemøller, "The Last Resort" (Poker Flat)—The Danish musician Anders Trentemøller made his name by releasing smart, moody dance-floor tracks, but this eighty-minute suite of songs is something else entirely. While still rooted in the computerized pulse of techno, it moves through passages of surly rock, twangy Western soundtracks, and gentle, watery electronic lullabies.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Jan. 5-6: The Springsteen pals **Southside Johnny** and the **Asbury Jukes** serve up a heaping order of R. & B.-flavored pub rock. Jan. 8: The session players Jimmy Vivino (a guitarist who performs on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien"), Rich Pagano (a drummer, at one time or another, for Rosanne Cash, Patti Smith, and many others), and John Conte (a bassist who has worked with many stars, including David Bowie and Billy Joel) gather under the rubric **Steaks & Chops.** The occasion is a birthday tribute to the great rock promoter Bill Graham, which offers an irresistible excuse for these three to jump on songs by Cream, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Traffic, and other classic-rock titans.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Jan. 5: **Man Man,** a shifting collective of excitable performers from Philadelphia with a "Flying Circus" approach to art rock. Jan. 6: The sonic assault of the Brooklyn noise-rockers **Black Dice.**

BOWERY POETRY CLUB
308 Bowery, at Bleecker St. (212-614-0505)—Jan. 5: **Gods and Monsters** is the rock outlet for the maverick ex-Captain Beefheart guitarist Gary Lucas. While the ever-shifting ensemble has featured such names as Matthew Sweet and the late Jeff Buckley (Lucas co-wrote his hit "Grace"), the current incarnation includes the former Television drummer, Billy Ficca, and the onetime Modern Lovers bassist, Ernie Brooks, making the band an underground-rock fan's dream team.

BROOKLYN LYCEUM
227 Fourth Ave., at President St., Park Slope (718-857-4816)—The "Brooklyn Songwriters Exchange," a weekly series bringing together talented out-of-towners and locals, gets under way for the new year on Jan. 7. The performers are **Jen Chapin,** the daughter of the folksinger Harry Chapin, **Victoria Vox,** a ukulele-toting musician from Baltimore, and **Greta Gertler,** an Australian expat with an expansive voice. The folk-pop singer **Rebecca Pronsky,** the founder of the series, is the host.

HIRO BALLROOM
The Maritime Hotel, 371 W. 16th St. (866-468-7619)—Jan. 9: **Emily Haines,** the front woman for the Canadian rockers Metric, stops by with songs from her début solo album, "Knives Don't Have Your Back."

ISSUE PROJECT ROOM
400 Carroll St., Brooklyn (718-330-0313)—In January, this funky performance space situated in a silo by the Gowanus Canal is home to "The Independents," a festival of sounds from outside the mainstream. The program includes everything from minimalism and free jazz to Americana and folk, with more than fifty artists from seven free-spirited record labels around the country (these are Tompkins Square, XI, Pogus, Locust, Ecstatic Peace, Family Vineyard, and Table

of Elements). It starts on Jan. 4 with the free-thinking jazz guitarist **Bern Nix**, the folk-raga guitarist **Peter Walker**, and the improviser **Charles Gayle**, a saxophonist and pianist. The following nights include the minimalist composer and intrepid soundsmith **Phill Niblock**, on Jan. 5, and the former home-taping avatar and multi-instrumentalist **Al Margolis**, on Jan. 6. The festival runs through Jan. 28.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Jan. 4-7: The *Times*'s "Arts & Leisure Weekend" (see also Readings and Talks) showcases emerging artists. Highlights include the Jan. 5 solo performance by the producer and beat-boxer **Taylor McFerrin** (son of Bobby) and back-to-back sets by two mini-divas on Jan. 7, with the Queens-born singer and songwriter **Morley**, who combines urban folk, soul, and R. & B. with a hint of Roberta Flack, followed by **Christina Courtin**, who turns vocal cartwheels while belting out jazz-inflected rock, blues, and soul with her band, Running Kicks.

NORTHSIX
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—Jan. 5: Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger, the eclectic, prolific brother-sister indie rockers who record and perform as the **Fiery Furnaces**, first gained notice after the release, in 2003, of their adventurous début album, "Gallowsbird's Bark." Critics went wild over their next album, "Blueberry Boat," from 2004, an epic combination of progressive rock, barroom blues, pirate songs, and midway effects. Since then, the pair has released "Rehearsing My Choir," a strange and sprawling concept album with major vocal support by the Friedbergers' grandmother Olga Sarantos, and "Bitter Tea," another long exercise in sensational sonic confusion and emotional exhaustion.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—Jan. 4: **DJ High Priest** (a.k.a. Nicholas Taylor), who first took to the turntables in the early eighties at parties given by his pal Jean-Michel Basquiat. With the salacious raps of **Bunny Rabbit** and the soulful sounds of the vocalist **Nomi.**

MICHAEL WELDON

TABLES FOR TWO
NONO KITCHEN

293 Seventh Ave., between 7th and 8th Sts., Brooklyn (718-369-8348)—That this spot, on a largely commercial Park Slope block, was previously occupied by the dismal India House may account, in part, for the warm reception NoNO Kitchen received when it opened, in October. Its inviting atmosphere—French windows frosted in a lacy pattern, cream walls and a copper-colored tin ceiling—make the food seem almost beside the point, although the menu itself is something of a novelty for the neighborhood, leaning as it does on Louisiana home-style cooking (the restaurant's name stands for "North of New Orleans"). There is plenty of Big Easy memorabilia on the walls: an autographed photo of Paul Prudhomme, photos of the French Quarter.

The chef and co-owner, Gregory Tatis, trained at Prudhomme's famed restaurant K-Paul (and went on to cook at New York's Delta Grill), and the influence shows. Asked for recommendations, the friendly waiter first extolled the blackened filet mignon, which, he explained, is "seared on the outside, so the meat almost boils itself," and went on to praise the catfish. "I'm from a fishing town," he said, "and the chef really does a remarkable job with this fish." Both turned out to be quite good, if not exactly phenomenal: the steak was tender, with a terrific bacon-and-onion demi-glace; the catfish was enlivened by its accompaniment of andouille and crawfish. It seemed that the meatier the offering, the better: the chicken-pork-and-tasso-ham jambalaya was perfect comfort food on a winter evening, and the superb alligator sausage was salty, spicy, and juicy. Less successful was the smoked-duck-and-crackling gumbo, which was tepid and weirdly tinny; a waiter eyed the barely touched cup and offered to take it off the bill (but didn't). And when it came time for dessert, the chocolate-orange mousse cake tasted like something out of a Whitman's sampler.

Despite these missteps, NoNO Kitchen seems to be living up to the anticipation. At heart, this is the best type of local joint—ambitious, but responsive to the crowd. "We're still feeling out the neighborhood," Tatis, who lives nearby, said. "We're really trying to cater to them, while keeping our roots with New Orleans." (Open daily for lunch and dinner, weekends for brunch. Entrées $15-$24.)

—*Andrea Thompson*

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Through Jan. 13: The vocalist **Andrea Marcovicci** invokes the spirit of Hildegarde, the larger-than-life, if now little remembered, queen of mid-century American night life.

BAM CAFÉ
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4139)—Jan. 5: The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, more commonly known as the Shakers, may have dwindled in numbers (celibacy being a central tenet of theirs), but they've left behind a legacy of simple living, sturdy furniture, and inspired music. Compared to other Christian denominations, the Shakers, in keeping with the nature of their trembling services, placed a greater emphasis than most on spontaneous composition. Scribes captured these wild sonic inspirations, using a unique form of notation. Recently, the jazz saxophonist Jeff Lederer poured over transcripts in Shaker archives and was inspired to create the band **Shakers N' Bakers**, an ensemble that heads toward the firmament.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—On Tuesdays through Jan. 16, **David Berger** and his **Sultans of Swing** big band revisit the music of Duke Ellington. Their special guest for this engagement is **Jon Hendricks**, the current king of vocalese.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Jan. 2-7: The trombonist **Delfeayo Marsalis** pays tribute to his former employer, the innovative drummer Elvin Jones, who died in 2004. Among the musicians joining Marsalis are his brother **Jason**, on drums, and for the closing two nights the saxophonist **Dave Liebman**, who played with Jones in the seventies.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Jan. 2-7: During its early-nineties run, **Bobby Watson's Horizon** introduced three soon-to-be jazz stalwarts—the trumpeter **Terell Stafford**, the pianist **Ed Simon**, and the bassist **Essiet Essiet**—while showcasing the leader's shrewd saxophone playing and **Victor Lewis's** exemplary drum work. The quintet has returned, older and wiser but still quite capable of filling the bandstand with good spirits.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Jan. 4-7: Take two early fusion heroes—the guitarist **John Abercrombie** and the drummer **Lenny White**—mix them with a venerable bass virtuoso, **Eddie Gomez**, and add a clarinet player with inclusive tendencies, **Don Byron**, and you get the confidently named Super Group. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul**. The **Mingus Big Band** takes over on Tuesdays.

92ND STREET Y
Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. (212-415-5500)—Jan. 6-8: The Y's "Lyrics & Lyricists" series opens for the season with a tribute to Rosemary Clooney, the first in the city since her death, in 2002. **James Naughton, John Pizzarelli,** and **Ann Hampton Callaway** do the honors, with assistance, on the last two nights, from Clooney's daughter-in-law **Debby Boone.**

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—Jan. 5: He shares a first name and an instrument with Dizzy Gillespie, but, while Gillespie was world-famous, the trumpeter **Dizzy Reece** is known only to true aficionados. His most notable recordings, a trio of Blue Note albums from the late fifties and early sixties, were reissued by Mosaic in 2004, but the reclusive hard-bop hero has mostly laid low for the past few decades.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—Traditionally, a drummer subordinates himself to the demands of the band: in the case of the Dutch percussionist **Han Bennink**, he is the band. And he plays as much with audience expectations as he does with any of his instruments. He slips in larger-than-life antics (playing his drum kit front, back, and center, as well as often playing the stage itself), but all of his work is based on astounding musicianship. The madcap improviser visits Jan. 9-10 and will be joined by the trumpeter **Dave Douglas**, the pianist **Anthony Coleman**, and many other brave souls.

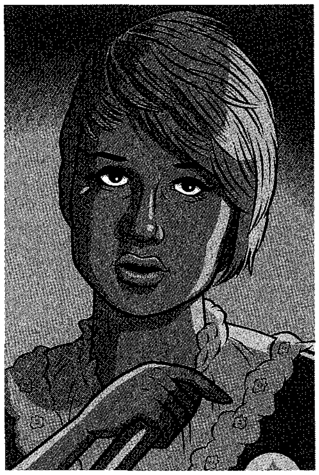
VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—The guitarist **Peter Bernstein** has performed at the Vanguard as a sideman innumerable times. On Jan. 2-7, he returns as a leader, helming a trio with the organist **Larry Goldings** and the drummer **Bill Stewart**. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s"** features work by ten Weimar-era artists, including Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Ludwig Meidner. Through Feb. 19. ♦ **"Louis Comfort Tiffany and Laurelton Hall: An Artist's Country Estate."** Through May 20. ♦ **"Americans in Paris, 1860-1900."** An enjoyable show of questing Yankees—among them Whistler, Cassatt, Eakins, Sargent, and Homer—abroad. Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde."** The Parisian gallerist Vollard (1866-1939) was an early champion of Matisse, Bonnard, van Gogh, Gauguin, Derain, and many others; this unusually canted show comprises samples of the work that they made with his encouragement and patronage. The two giants of the show's title are represented with canvases from solo shows that Vollard mounted in 1895 and 1901, respectively. Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"Nan Kempner: American Chic."** Through March 4. ♦ **"Sean Scully: Wall of Light."** Through Jan. 15. ♦ **"Coaxing the Spirits to Dance: Art of the Papuan Gulf."** Through Sept. 3. ♦ **"Discovering Tutankhamun: The Photographs of Harry Burton."**

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SPACE INVASION

Along with blogs that post MP3s and the bottomless visual library of YouTube, the democratic technology of MySpace has changed the way that musical acts find their audiences. A band can start a MySpace page for free, and post four songs for downloading, streaming, or both. This makes an artist's music instantly available to an international audience. But what happens after you and your favorite MySpace band have been introduced? That band probably wants people to come to a real concert, and sometimes they do. I am fond of the deeply odd, occasionally obscene art rap of Bunny Rabbit, a performer who says that she was "born in the 80s with a heart made of diamonds and an ass full of maple syrup." Her songs, produced by a woman who calls herself Black Cracker, are available at www.myspace.com/loversandcrypts. I look forward to seeing her on Jan. 4 at Tonic, but dozens of other acts will remain in their original MySpace incarnation: four songs in a browser and no more.



—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

Through April 29. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"New Photography 2006"** features the work of Jonathan Monk, Barbara Probst, and Jules Spinatsch. Through Jan. 8. ♦ **"Manet and the Execution of Maximilian."** Through Jan. 29. ♦ **"Brice Marden: A Retrospective of Paintings and Drawings."** Through Jan. 15. ♦ **"OMA in Beijing: China Central Television Headquarters by Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren."** Through Feb. 26. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth, and Memory"** includes work by Zurbarán, Murillo, Velázquez, and Cotán, among many others. Through March 28. ♦ **"Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York."** Through Jan. 21. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005."** Through Feb. 11. ♦ All roads in modernism lead back to Josef Albers and Lászlό Moholy-Nagy in **"Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World."** Through Jan. 21. ♦ **"Picasso and American Art."** Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Photography and the Self: The Legacy of F. Holland Day."** Through March 11. ♦ **Mark Grotjahn's** large-scale works in pencil toy with geometry and multiple vanishing points; he ventures into color with a pair of drawings in saturated reds and yellows that anchor the room. Through Jan. 7. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—Discovered on every continent but Antarctica, lustrous, malleable, noncorroding, conductive, and easily visible in the water that precipitates it onto the earth's surface, gold has been worked by human beings since at least 4000 B.C. These and other enchanting factoids (the total amount of gold ever mined, for example, would fill just sixty tractor trailers) glint in **"Gold,"** which beckons like a treasure-house with colossal nuggets, weighty ingots, jewelry, and statuary. There are also demonstrations of science-related uses (the visors of astronauts' helmets are coated with it), historical information about Sutter's Mill and the Klondike, and a scale on which to estimate one's worth if weighed in you know what. Through Aug. 19. ♦ The walk-through vivarium at **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter"** is filled with hundreds of lepidoptera who light on cut fruit, lush vegetation, and visitors. Through May 28. ♦ **"Lizards and Snakes: Alive!"** Through Jan. 7. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life, 1990-2005."** Through Jan. 21. ♦ **"Tigers of Wrath: Watercolors by Walton Ford."** Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Ron Mueck."** Through Feb. 4. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Design Life Now: National Design Triennial 2006."** Through July 29. ♦ **"Made to Scale: Staircase Masterpieces."** A collection of staircase models, mostly from nineteenth-century France. Through June 3. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804): A New Testament."** Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"Masterpieces of European Painting from the Cleveland Museum of Art."** Through Jan. 28. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—**"Ecotopia,"** the museum's second Triennial of Photography and Video, sets itself the ambitious task of synthesizing material by contemporary artists concerned with the environment in the broadest sense—from global warming and species extinction to toxic dumping and wildlife poaching. The resulting exhibition may not always be coherent, but it is lively, intelligent, stimulating, and full of fine work by Robert Adams, An-My Lê, Thomas Ruff, Mitch Epstein, Alessandra Sanguinetti, Simon Norfolk, Doug Aitken, and more than thirty others. The participants, with few exceptions, are making art, not messages, so they address the show's hot-button theme without preaching or condescending to the audience. Through Jan. 7. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and weekends, 10 to 6, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—**"Alex Katz Paints Ada."** Through March 18. ♦ **"Masters of American Comics"** and **"Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics."** Through Jan. 28. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45, and Thursdays, 11 to 8.)

MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"Saul Steinberg: Illuminations."** Through March 4. ♦ **"Fragonard and the French Tradition."** Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"Bob Dylan's American Journey: 1956-1966."** Through Jan. 6. ♦ **"Mozart at 250: A Celebration."** Through Jan. 7. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. (212-534-1672)—**"A City on Paper: Saul Steinberg's New York."** Through March 25. ♦ **"Black Style Now."** Through Feb. 19. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
170 Central Park W., at 77th St. (212-873-3400)—**"Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery."** The museum's first foray into contemporary art explores an ignoble history. The artists represented include Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, and Fred Wilson. Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War."** Through Sept. 3. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6, and Friday evenings until 8.)

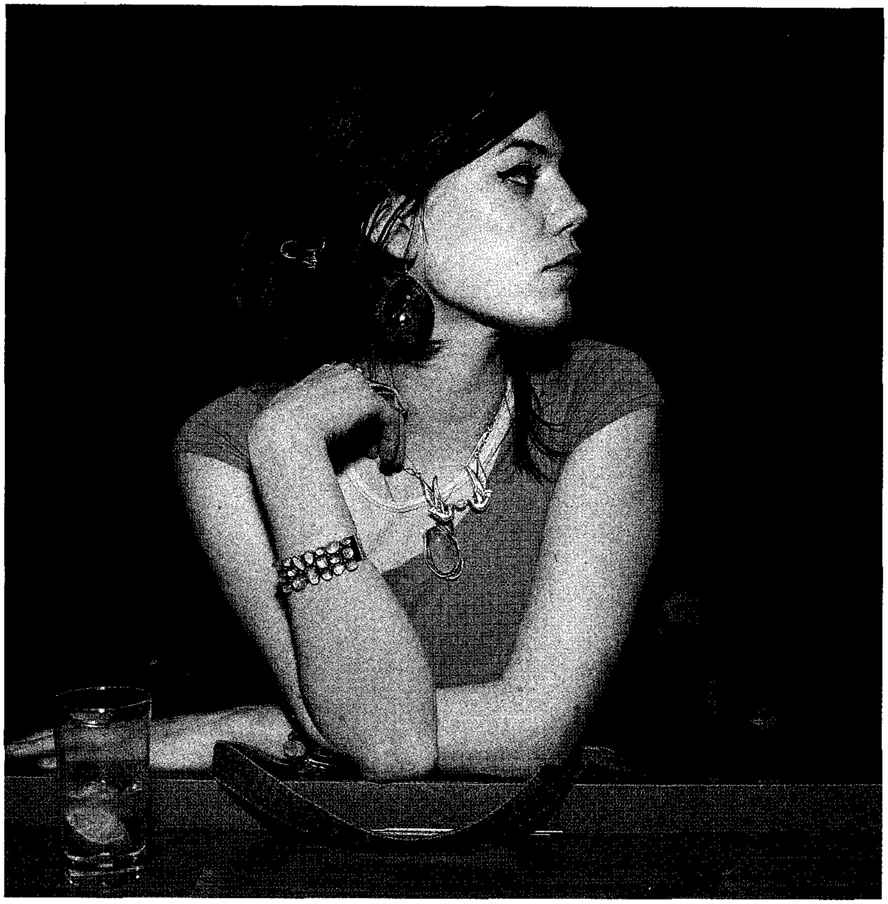
GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

"LOLA ALVAREZ BRAVO & HER CIRCLE"
If you missed Aperture's more focussed and scholarly Bravo survey earlier in the season, this show will provide some small consolation, along with plenty of important photographs by the artist and her even more illustrious pals. Most notable are pictures with Mexican themes by Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Tina Modotti, and Bravo's husband, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, but Lola definitely holds her own here. Bravo's concern for her country's vast working class never feels rote, and her pictures of women at a clothesline and men sleeping in the shade of a hay truck are full of wit and warmth. Through Jan. 6. (Throckmorton, 145 E. 57th St. 212-223-1059.)

Short List

HARRY CALLAHAN: Pace/MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999. Through Jan. 5. **CHARLES JONES:** Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010. Through Jan. 13. **MARILYN MINTER:** Salon 94, at 12 E. 94th St. 646-672-9212. Through Jan. 20. **SIGMAR POLKE:** Michael Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623. Through Jan. 13. **FRED SANDBACK:** Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677. Through Jan. 20. **SAUL STEINBERG:** Baumgold, 74 E. 79th St. 212-861-7338. Through Feb. 10. **"ROY LICHTENSTEIN WORKS ON PAPER: A RETROSPECTIVE":** James Goodman, 41 E. 57th St. 212-593-3737. Through Jan. 15.



Sarah Stolfa's photograph of Jesse Schnabel, in the show "Patrons," at Silverstein.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

GAIL ALBERT HALABAN
Halaban, a photographer whose previous work concerned groups of wealthy, social young women at their leisure, has followed similarly privileged women into motherhood. The results—big, boffo color pictures that look like Tina Barney crossed with Lauren Greenfield—are more emphatic, more satirical, and more complicated than before, perhaps because they reflect their subjects' ambivalence toward nagging new responsibilities. Halaban can be heavy-handed (one woman on a rattan chaise holds up a flash card for her son to read; "WANT," it says, pointedly), but she stages these images so deftly that you believe every one, even if you'd rather not. Through Jan. 6. (Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 24th St. 212-989-7600.)

ROZ CHAST
The beloved and brilliant *New Yorker* contributor recently published a new collection of cartoons, "Theories of Everything," covering her work from 1978 to the present. More than twenty-five of her drawings and watercolors are on view here, including "Attack of the Creeping Doily," "The Gods of Catalogues," and "Delusional World of the Free-Range Chicken." Through Feb. 10. (Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410.)

JACK HALLBERG / MIGUEL LUCIANO
Violently pretty, Hallberg's abstractions of raised dots and disks of gooey, pastel acrylic paint evoke DNA strands, freeway interchanges, and line-dancing galaxies. They should have no right, somehow, to be so pleasurable, but they will please you as much as you let them, and then some more. Hallberg was chosen for this show by Dave Hickey, whose doctrine of weaponized beauty fits him like a neon glove. Miguel Luciano's handsome, posterish, identity-politics paintings (Ronald McDonald as an oppressor of Puerto Rico) and nifty satirical objects (platinum-plated plantains) suggest late entries to the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Through Jan. 27. (Cue, 511 W. 25th St. 212-206-3583.)

ROBERT IRWIN
One of Irwin's finest works, "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue^3" sandwiches space between three vast panels overhead, painted the eponymous colors, and identical panels on the floor. The paint is glossy and reflective. Illumination is natural, from skylights. The experience is ambient, ambulatory, and slowly engulfing. Irwin expatiates on the matter-of-fact sublime of Barnett Newman's paintings of the same name. Lawrence Weschler titled a book on Irwin "Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees." In seeing this work, you may forget who sees it, losing yourself in sheer perception. Do not miss it. Through Jan. 27. (PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-929-7000.)

TAEWON JANG
Fresh out of Columbia's M.F.A. program, Jang is a young photographer whose history of gang activity (some of it literally inscribed on his body) provides his most potent material. For this series of dramatically shadowed color closeups, he created patterns of black dots on the nape of his neck, inner wrist, and other areas of bare, burnished flesh with drops of hot sealing wax. In turning himself into what appears to be a human pincushion, Jang recalls Chris Burden's gunshot wound and Vito Acconci's bite marks, but his gesture cuts deeper into issues of guilt, expiation, and redemption. Through Jan. 6. (Cho, 522 W. 23rd St. 212-255-6783.)

DAN PETERMAN
The ecology-minded Midwestern artist noodles with themes of consumption. Photographic blowups of his boarding passes from a trip to a conference on carbon emissions suggest a mea culpa on behalf of the airplane. A big, carpentered structure, based on a Han-dynasty funerary object, models virtuous, low-down symbiosis. It combines latrines and a pigsty: pigs eat human waste, humans eat pigs that become human waste, tra-la. There's also a platform equipped with lecterns facing in opposite directions, for being of two minds out loud. Through Jan. 20. (Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000.)

"ABSTRACT"
The new abstract painting looks a lot like the old, with a few major realignments. Alex Kwartler filters Kenneth Noland's hard-edged compositions through disco, adding rainbow patterns and backgrounds mimicking black velvet. Rebecca Morris's patchwork abstractions look like early-twentieth-century painting mixed with remnants from a quilting bee. And Chris Martin wears his heart on his sleeve, paying homage in one canvas—the names of his honorees are inscribed on the edges—to Isaac Hayes, Yayoi Kusama, Andrew Masullo, Michael Krebber, and Paul Feeley. Humorless rigor has given way to homey reinterpretation. Or, to quote Martin, "Abstract painting is dead. That's why it has become so interesting again." Through Jan. 6. (Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 534 W. 26th St. 212-744-7400.)

Short List

ROBERT BECHTLE: Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300. Through Jan. 6. **ELLSWORTH KELLY:** Marks, 523 W. 24th St., 522 W. 22nd St., and 526 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200. Through Jan. 27. **ENRIQUE METINIDES:** Kern, 532 W. 20th St. 212- 367-9663. Through Jan. 13. **IVAN NAVÁRRO:** Roebling Hall, 606 W. 26th St. 212-929-8180. Through Jan. 10. **ROBERT PRUITT:** Clementine, 623 W. 27th St. 212-243-5937. Through Jan. 6. **SARAH STOLFA / RYAN WEIDEMAN:** Silverstein, 535 W. 24th St. 212-627-3930. Through Jan. 6. **CHEYNEY THOMPSON:** Kreps, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-741-8849. Through Jan. 6.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

LAURA OWENS
Owens's mastery of high-keyed color and bravura brushwork lends a flinty aftertaste to pastoral fantasies that are pure fructose: peppy nymphs and anodyne satyrs, cutesy-poo kids, birds, and bugs. It's as if this leading Los Angeles artist wanted to embarrass us for liking painting. One of her stated inspirations, Marie Laurencin, is Goya, by comparison. Another—Matisse—is taken on directly in a big, spirited pastiche of "The Joy of Life," whose formal success tips the hand of Owens's ambition and makes her insipid figuration truly exasperating. Through Jan. 13. (Gavin Brown, 620 Greenwich St. 212-627-5258.)

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
The eight-week winter repertory season opens with thirteen performances of "The Sleeping Beauty," staged by Peter Martins in 1991 (in honor of Lincoln Kirstein, who co-founded the company with Balanchine). It is still the company's most lavish production, as befits what the critic Andrew Porter, in these pages, called "the grandest, fullest, and finest achievement of classical ballet," set to the second of Tchaikovsky's great ballet scores. Martins trimmed and refit some of the scenes, reducing the ballet to two acts. He also included Balanchine's "Garland Dance," from 1981, in Act I, as well as some new dances of his own. The set designs (by David Mitchell) evoke the châteaux of the Loire—and Watteau's garden scenes—and are overlaid with projected images, to suggest the passage of time during Princess Aurora's hundred-year slumber. Casts are given on the company Web site one week in advance. (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-870-5570. Jan. 3 at 7:30, Jan. 4-5 at 8, Jan. 6 at 2 and 8, Jan. 7 at 3, and Jan. 9 at 7:30. Through Feb. 25.)

LES BALLETS TROCKADERO DE MONTE CARLO
Léonide Massine's "Gaîté Parisienne" and Jerome Robbins's "The Cage" are the latest classics to get saucy reinterpretations by the all-male Trocks, who dance in drag and giant toe shoes. But the thirty-two-year-old troupe has more than inappropriate chest hair and camp on its side. Illuminating flashes of style and wit, and some unexpectedly lovely steps, provide texture along with the belly laughs. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave. 212-242-0800. Jan. 2-3 at 7:30, Jan. 4-5 at 5, Jan. 6 at 3 and 8, and Jan. 7 at 3.)

DANCE ON CAMERA FESTIVAL
The long-running festival, presented by the Dance Films Association and the Film Society of Lincoln Center, focusses this year on collaborations between artists of different backgrounds. Mainly, though, it is a rare opportunity to see all kinds of movies of and about dance from around the world. The programs are varied and rich, and include Dominique Delouche's 2005 documentary about the Russian-French dancer and choreographer Serge Lifar (on whom Balanchine made the role of the Prodigal Son in his 1929 ballet), a screening of Mark Morris's gripping opera-ballet "Dido and Aeneas," and "Biped," Charles Atlas's film documenting Merce Cunningham's eponymous 1999 multimedia collaboration with the digital artists Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar. (Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-875-5600. For a complete schedule, visit www.dancefilmsassn.org. Starts Jan. 3. Through Jan. 14.)

"FRESH TRACKS"
Since 1965, Dance Theatre Workshop has curated this getting-to-know-you series, introducing emerging choreographers to downtown audiences. This year, six artists (selected from a hundred and twenty applicants) present works of fifteen minutes or less. Tara O'Con dances a physically punishing solo, "Sternum," while Ursula Eagly, who dances with Yoshiko Chuma, has choreographed a duet for two singing performers moving in tandem. The David Dorfman dancer Heather McArdle begins her solo at a desk, with the audience reading her computer monitor over her shoulder. Rounding out the bill are small ensemble works from Lala Ghahreman and the Israeli-born choreographer Deganit Shemy and a solo by the former "De la Guarda" cast member Ani Weinstein. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Jan. 4-6 at 7:30.)

COMPANY EAST
The Japanese troupe brings its visually dramatic, Noh-based production of "Medea" to New York. As per the Noh tradition, the female protagonist is played by a man, the dynamic company director, Hiroshi Jin. Performed in Japanese with patches of English, the production comes alive in the frenzied murder scenes as choral dance sequences work up a Walpurgisnacht atmosphere. (La Mama Annex, 74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. Jan. 4-6 at 7:30 and Jan. 7 at 2:30 and 7:30. Through Jan. 14.)

KARL ANDERSON/SLAMFEST
The appreciation of anarchic energy that led Anderson to name his company SLAMFEST twenty years ago comes through in this "Retrospectacle" sampling. A sendup of love-duet conventions includes slaps, meows, and biting. And "Words," a late-eighties study in male vulnerability—originally danced by the choreographer in the nude—gets a fresh interpretation by the burlesque dancer Dirty Martini. But along with the satire, Anderson also offers the introspective solo "Embracing Nothingness" and the understated beauty and precision of "Intercourse," a duet with Kate Weare. (Joyce SoHo, 155 Mercer St. 212-334-7479. Jan. 4-6 at 8.)

KELLEY DONOVAN AND DANCERS
The Boston-based choreographer and her company of seventeen eager, unseasoned women dancers present "It's All Forgotten Now," an evening-length exploration of cycles of change. Set to a buzzing-and-clicking sound score, the dance moves in circles, spatially and structurally. The Eastern-tinged movement is serpentine, always twisting back on itself, but only in the solos for Donovan herself—a big, beautiful mover—does it come into sharp focus. (Merce Cunningham Studio, 55 Bethune St. 781-420-3893. Jan. 5 at 9 and Jan. 6 at 8.)

"BEYOND THE SILK ROAD"
In a program at the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Center, five female choreographers (all of whom go by their first names) explore the disparate styles of Middle Eastern dance. Layla's "Ah Ya Leil" updates traditional Turkish dance with Middle Eastern pop, while Blanca's "Peek-a-Boo" is a demonstration of an Americanized style of belly dance. Zenaide, Altagracia, and Ayshe add their own works to the intriguing collection of hybrids. (1395 Lexington Ave., at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Jan. 7 at 3.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
The Met's production of Bellini's **"I Puritani,"** a veritable feast for coloratura addicts, returns, featuring the stupendous Anna Netrebko singing the role of Elvira Walton. The men in her life are sung by Eric Cutler, Franco Vassallo, and John Relyea; Patrick Summers conducts. (Jan. 3 at 7:30 and Jan. 6 at 1:30.) ♦ Julie Taymor's physically exuberant, if intellectually scattered, production of Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte" is nothing if not entertaining; it returns for the holidays not only in the full German version but in an abridged English-language version, **"The Magic Flute,"** ideal for families and opera newbies (and offered at lower prices). The Met has not stinted on casting, with Ying Huaeng, Erika Miklósa, Matthew Polenzani, and Nathan Gunn in the leading roles; Jens Georg Bachmann. (Jan. 4 at 1. This is the final performance.) ♦ The complete **"Die Zauberflöte"** is performed with a strong cast that includes Lisa Milne, Cornelia Götz, Christoph Strehl, Rodion Pogossov (a winning Papageno), and the great René Pape (in the short but crucial role of the Speaker); Scott Bergeson, a (barely) adequate Mozartean, conducts. (Jan. 4 and Jan. 8 at 8 and Jan. 6 at 8:30. Note: Nicole Heaston replaces Milne on Jan. 6, and Erika Miklósa and Matthew Polenzani replace Götz and Strehl on Jan. 6 and Jan. 8.) ♦ Plácido Domingo takes the title role in the world-première performances of Tan Dun's **"The First Emperor,"** an epic tale of ancient China. Tan, a master of musical spectacle known by millions for his music for such films as "Hero" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," collaborates with the equally renowned director Zhang Yimou, who presides over a production created with the set designer Fan Yue. (Ha Jin co-wrote the libretto with Zhang.) Also with the estimable Elizabeth Futral, Paul Groves, and Michelle deYoung; Tan, an experienced and incisive conductor, is on the podium. (Jan. 5 and Jan. 9 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

AMATO OPERA: "DIE FLEDERMAUS"
Anthony Amato's feisty band of professional and amateur singers give their all in the frothy Viennese comedy by Johann Strauss II, sung in English. (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 212-228-8200. Jan. 5-6 at 7:30 and Jan. 7 at 2:30. These are the final performances.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Two distinguished veterans—Zubin Mehta and Pinchas Zukerman—take a journey down some very well-travelled roads. Zukerman plays the Beethoven Violin Concerto before intermission, followed by Mehta's rendition of "The Rite of Spring," one of the works with which he established his fame as a conductor. (Jan. 4 and Jan. 9 at 7:30, Jan. 5 at 11 A.M., and Jan. 6 at 8.) ♦ Mehta and Zukerman will also perform the Beethoven in a Saturday-matinée concert that begins with the "Fanfares Liturgiques" for brass and percussion by the French theatrical composer Henri Tomasi (1901-1971), a colleague of Prokofiev and Honegger. (Jan. 6 at 2.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

"ONE DOLLAR CONCERT"
The Brazilian pianist João Carlos Martins was twenty-one years old when he gave his first performance at Carnegie Hall, a benefit for the children of New York; soon after he became recognized as a formidable performer of Bach. Forty-five years later, having suffered severe injuries in both hands, Martins, ever devoted to noble callings, returns to conduct the Bachiana Chamber Orchestra for a one-night "One Dollar Concert" (the price for all seats) to call attention to the preservation of the Amazon rain forest. The program includes Bach's Orchestral Suite

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
CRIMSON TIDE

Sergei Paradjanov's "The Color of Pomegranates," which will be shown on Friday as part of the Dance on Camera Festival, at the Walter Reade Theatre, doesn't have much dance in it, but it has everything else you could want. Paradjanov (1924-90) was a Georgian-born Armenian fascinated by the Soviet Union's rural tribes. The subject of "The Color of Pomegranates" (1969) is the life of the medieval Armenian troubadour Sayat Nova, but to know that, you'd have to read the publicity materials. The film is actually a ninety-minute hallucination. Pomegranates bleed; old women stir smoking vats; a ram is sacrificed; angels hop over black fields; a thousand sheep stream into a church to attend a burial. Some of the people are dressed in silks and jewels, while others wear skins that look as though they were just taken off the yak. The movie is a cross between a children's theatrical and a Byzantine mosaic. This surrealistic style won Paradjanov a four-year stay in the Gulag. For many more years, he was barred from working. He made only eight feature films. See this one.

—*Joan Acocella*

YUKO SHIMIZU

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
MARITAL ARTS

There is no more sumptuous example of the Warner Bros. melodrama than "Mr. Skeffington," made in 1944 and showing at MOMA on Jan. 3. The film, directed by Vincent Sherman, stars Bette Davis as Fanny: loud, brittle, and precious, like fluorescent Ming porcelain. In the course of the story, which runs from the outbreak of the First World War to the later stages of the Second, she ages from an ingénue with a herd of frustrated admirers to a raddled doll in a wig. Young Fanny marries Job Skeffington (Claude Rains) for money rather than love, and it takes her the rest of the movie to switch her priorities. (Her shrink explains, "That's where a husband comes in—when your romantic days are over.") Everything gleams here, including the Franz Waxman score, yet, thanks to Rains, there are shades of genuine distress. As a Jew, Mr. Skeffington meets prejudice at home and near-destruction abroad; as a father, he weeps in a restaurant at the thought of being parted from his daughter. Rains vs. Davis: it's a great match of opposites, and the final scene is, rightly and movingly, an honorable tie.

—*Anthony Lane*

No. 1, the Prelude from Villa Lobos's Bachianas Brasileiras No. 4, and the world première of a new piano concerto by the composer-pianist Stefan Meylaers ("Amazonas"). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Jan. 6 at 8.)

AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: "PIONEERING INFLUENCE"
The music of the Belgian Wagnerite César Franck and his devoted band of Parisian followers makes for an alternate history of fin-de-siècle French music, before Debussy and Ravel and the phenomenon of Impressionism threatened to make them all seem a touch passé. And yet these composers all contributed a number of vital, colorful, and spiritually intense works, many of which are habitually ignored. Enter Leon Botstein—who else?—to make their case anew. On the program are Ernest Chausson's haunting "Poème de l'Amour et de la Mer" (with the Scottish mezzo-soprano Jane Irwin) and Albéric Magnard's "Hymn to Venus," along with the magnificent single symphonies of Paul Dukas (in C Major) and Franck (in D Minor). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500. Jan. 7 at 3.)

RECITALS

MIDTOWN CONCERTS
An intimate concert of vocal works by the medieval master Guillaume Dufay is the next offering in the free lunchtime series at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, performed by the vocal trio Machicoti. (135 W. 31st St. Jan. 3 at 7. No tickets required.)

BARGEMUSIC
Jan. 4 at 7:30: Jack Reilly, a noted composer-pianist in both the jazz and classical realms (and an authority on the music of Bill Evans) celebrates his seventy-fifth birthday by offering the world première of his solo piano piece "The Blue Sage: Theme and Five Variations with Improvisation." Also on the concert are such works as "Clara's Bell" and "Unichrom," performed with the New York bassist Harvie S. ♦ Jan. 5 at 7:30: The guitarist Jorge Caballero brings a varied selection of music to the barge's stage, including Poulenc's "Sarabande," Milhaud's "Segoviana," Turina's Sonata for Guitar and, interestingly, an arrangement of Dvořák's "New World Symphony" by Yamashita. ♦ Jan. 6 at 7:30 and Jan. 7 at 4: The clarinettist Julian Milkis, the cellist Eugene Osadchy, and the pianist Nina Kogan offer vibrant works for their instruments by Beethoven, Nino Rota, Astor Piazzolla, and Paquito D'Rivera. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

EMPIRE VIOLS
Gotham's ever-striving early-music scene has engendered yet another small grouping, a pair of viol players (Martha McGaughey and Carlene Stober) in residence at the Second Presbyterian Church, a building that reflects the severe Scottish style of its founders. They perform music by Morley, Kapsberger, and Sainte-Colombe with the soprano Elizabeth Baber and the lute and theorbo player Charles Weaver. (Central Park W. at 96th St. Jan. 5 at 8. A donation is suggested.)

BROOKLYN FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC: ECCO
A recently established ensemble of young string players from top conservatories—otherwise known as the East Coast Chamber Orchestra—offers an appealingly varied program of works by Corelli ("La Folia"), Adams ("Shaker Loops," still one of his most exhilarating pieces), Stravinsky (the "Concerto in D"), and Dvořák (the Serenade for Strings). (Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, Lafayette Ave. at S. Oxford St., Brooklyn. 718-855-3053. Jan. 7 at 3.)

JUPITER SYMPHONY CHAMBER PLAYERS
The Jens Nygaard tribute ensemble, continuing its founder's penchant for out-of-the-way repertory, performs music by Reicha, Schubert, and Gounod (the charming "Petite Symphonie") along with arrangements of favorite numbers from "Don Giovanni" and "The Barber of Seville." The distinguished bassoonist Frank Morelli is the special guest. (152 W. 66th St. 212-799-1259. Jan. 8 at 2 and 7:30.)

MOVIES OPENING

CODE NAME: THE CLEANER
Cedric the Entertainer stars in this comedy as an amnesiac janitor who is persuaded that he is a secret agent. Co-starring Lucy Liu and Nicollette Sheridan; directed by Les Mayfield. Opening Jan. 5. (In wide release.)

THE COMEDY OF POWER
Reviewed below in Now Playing. In French. Opening Jan. 5. (IFC Center.)

FREEDOM WRITERS
In this drama, written and directed by Richard LaGravenese, a teacher (Hilary Swank) inspires her struggling students to pursue higher education. Opening Jan. 5. (In wide release.)

HAPPILY N'EVER AFTER
An animated fantasy about an attempt by Cinderella's evil stepmother and other villains to take over Fairy Tale Land. Directed by Paul J. Bolger; with the voices of Sigourney Weaver, Sarah Michelle Gellar, George Carlin, and Wallace Shawn. Opening Jan. 5. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

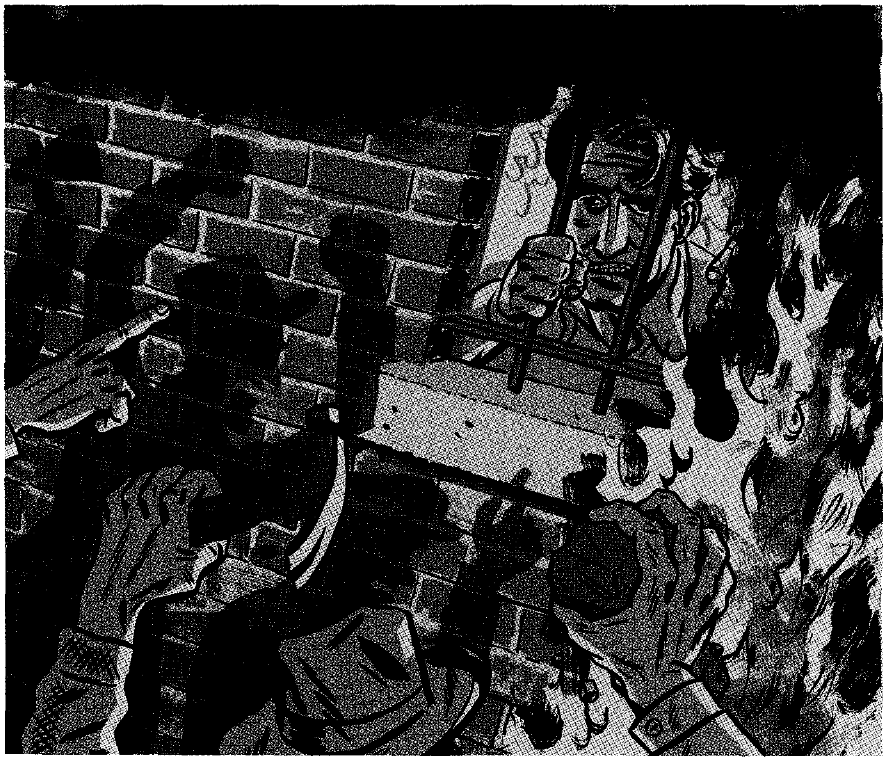
APOCALYPTO
The latest project from Mel Gibson is nothing if not ambitious. His actors are little known or unknown, and the dialogue is delivered wholly in a dialect of Mayan. Yet the movie's appeal derives from its full-blooded, not to say traditional, devotion to unstinting action; apart from a brief lull in which a tribe listens to a storyteller by firelight, the film has a remorselessness that verges on the exhausting. Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood) is wrenched from his village and—with a crew of companions, but without his wife and child—dragged through the jungle by the fearsome Zero Wolf (Raoul Trujillo) to one of the great Mayan temples. Some viewers may lack the stomach for what follows, not least because some characters end up lacking more than a stomach. Hearts are plucked as easily as strawberries; a fine red mist sprays from a beaten brain. The portrait of a culture defined by violence is a convincing one, even if Gibson's motive for steeping himself in the particulars of cruelty may be too murky to bear examination. His hand slips only toward the end, where the sense of melodrama, rising like a flood, brims over into the ludicrous.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/18/06.) (In wide release.)

BLOOD DIAMOND
A rousing, old-fashioned romantic adventure tale set against the civil war in Sierra Leone in 1999. Djimon Hounsou is a fisherman whose young son is abducted by the thuggish Revolutionary United Front and turned into a killer. Hounsou, forced by the R.U.F. to work in the diamond fields, finds and hides a very big stone. Leonardo DiCaprio, looking and sounding tougher than in the past, is a cynical diamond smuggler who wants to get hold of it, and Jennifer Connelly, flirtatious and avid for once, is a danger-junkie magazine reporter who cozies up to DiCaprio in order to find out how diamonds are smuggled out of the country and sold to Europeans for arms money that fuels the endless war. These three take turns using, helping, and half-trusting one another as young killers rampage through the country firing AK-47s from the backs of pickup trucks. The director, Edward Zwick, stays poised on the edge of popular romance, and that turns out to be a good place to be; he does serious work there, pulling back from the obvious and digging deeper into Africa's troubles. Written by Charles Leavitt, from an idea that he developed with C. Gaby Mitchell.—*David Denby* (12/11/06) (In wide release.)

CASINO ROYALE
James Bond returns in a new incarnation. Much of the debate that preceded this twenty-first installment of 007 revolved around the appointment of Daniel Craig to the leading role; a more pressing question was whether the ailing Bond franchise itself deserved

DIVYA SRINIVASAN

to survive. The solution, as controlled by the director Martin Campbell, is to put the narrative on a low-carb diet: no fatty subplots, no indigestible villains, a minimum of frills. Our hero is pure protein, frequently bloodied, and the movie is rich in tenderizing violence; the torture scene, lifted grimly from Ian Fleming's novel, is unfit for younger viewers. The plot requires Bond to outwit Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen), a banker to the world's terrorists; given the film's paucity of gadgets, 007 must rely on his gambling skills, his fists, and the comforting presence of Vesper Lynd (Eva Green), who introduces herself with the words "I'm the money." The movie is ominously long, but, for the first time in many years, we are steered away from silliness and toward Fleming's vision of a bitter and undependable world. With Judi Dench as M.—*A.L.* (11/20/06) (In wide release.)



"Fury," Fritz Lang's 1936 drama starring Spencer Tracy, screens Jan. 4 at MOMA.

ERIK T. JOHNSON

THE COMEDY OF POWER

The exuberant cynicism of Claude Chabrol's ironic drama, about a crusading prosecutor's campaign against corporate and political corruption, yields to his deeper doubts about the nature of justice. The straight-arrow official, Jeanne Charmant-Killman—whom Isabelle Huppert invests with her unique blend of calm assurance and taut control—first targets Michel Humeau (François Berléand), a graying C.E.O. with a messy love life whose paper trail leads to friends in high places. But, as the investigation closes in on the real powers behind the far-reaching scheme, these big-time operators—all men, all smooth middle-aged bons vivants—turn the tables on the inquisitor. Drawing on the real-life prosecution of a recent scandal, Chabrol, a former law student, seems to be having more fun with a film than he's had in years, and it's contagious. His suavely professional filmmaking builds to delicate piercing strokes at the big moments, and poses his bigger question: if injustice gives such pleasure, how can the French resist? In French.—*Richard Brody* (IFC Center.)

CRIME IN THE STREETS

In Don Siegel's vehement 1956 drama about juvenile delinquents in a New York slum, the violence rapidly escalates from the opening gang fight to a plot by the leader of the pack, eighteen-year-old Frankie Dane (John Cassavetes), to murder an informant. A ubiquitous streetwise social worker (James Whitmore) dispenses compassion and wise counsel, advising an immigrant father (Will Kuluva) not to beat his son (Sal Mineo) and laying bare the psychic wounds of the fatherless Frankie, but there is little he can do besides pick up the pieces after the damage is done. Reginald Rose's script, based on his teleplay, is wordy and then some, but some of the speechifying remains trenchant—Frankie's tirade about the origin of liberal progressivism in class-based fear has no answer even today—and Siegel's stark direction shrewdly defers to the project's roots in hard-nosed theatre. The film is built around long takes of tightly composed performances, culminating in a bravura four-minute shot with entrances and exits brilliantly orchestrated by the commanding presence of Cassavetes. In his first headlining role, the young actor dominates the screen with his brooding volatility; the emphatic touches he brings to his every scene are worthy of a co-director credit.—*R.B.* (MOMA; Jan. 6 and Jan. 8.)

CRUMB

Terry Zwigoff's beautiful and risky documentary, from 1994, shows how the former underground cartoonist (and current *New Yorker* contributor) R. Crumb continued to ply his blasphemous, self-exposing craft long after an idiot smile settled over our official culture. After peeking with Zwigoff into Crumb's sketchbooks and savoring corrosive social satires like his "Short History of America" (which moves from unspoiled paradise to urban blight in a handful of frames), you'll be inclined to agree with the *Time* magazine art critic Robert Hughes, who calls him "the Brueghel of the last half of the twentieth century." But the movie isn't a testimonial or a valentine. "Crumb" is unpredictable and galvanizing: an empathetic portrait of the artist that also unveils a trenchant view of an American family's dashed illusions. It's as darkly funny and energetic as any of Crumb's creations. Pacing the film to the languid bounce of the old blues, jazz, and ragtime that sustain Crumb's soul, the filmmaker slowly yet decisively draws the viewer into Crumb's chaotic background. By the end, you're profoundly startled—not only by the psychological wounds of Robert's reclusive older brother, Charles, and his weirdo-ascetic younger brother, Max, but also by how much feeling Zwigoff has obliged you to invest in this clan.—*Michael Sragow* (Moving Image; Jan. 7.)

THE DEAD GIRL

Karen Moncrieff's harsh yet tender post-feminist drama, set in a desolate West of small houses and cheap motels, resembles a short, sharp novel about wrecked lives and belated redemption. Its five chapters concerning five women—the titular victim and four others affected by her death—are energized by the intensely focussed, lived-in performances Moncrieff gets from Toni Collette as the stranger who finds the body, Mary Beth Hurt as the killer's wife, Marcia Gay Harden as the girl's mother, and especially Rose Byrne, who is quietly luminous (and bravely makeup-free) as a pathologist who studies the corpse. In a final flashback that brings the story full circle, Brittany Murphy is the girl herself, a young prostitute with a touching, plausible dilemma. The finely observed scenes are built from moments of realistic pain that deftly evoke lifetimes of bad memories, but Moncrieff's quasi-literary achievement has a price: the film is nothing to look at, awkward shots strive vainly toward style, and the music is ridiculously portentous. But the many lapses in directorial taste and judgment don't break the spell of honest feeling or blur the hard-won wisdom that emerges from the experience.—*R.B.* (Angelika Film Center.)

DÉJÀ VU

In this new thriller directed by Tony Scott and produced by Jerry Bruckheimer—a veteran pair of pyromaniacs if ever there was one—five hundred and forty-three men, women, and children board a New Orleans ferry and are promptly blown sky-high by a terrorist. Scott then makes pretty pictures out of the flaming bodies shooting through the air and falling into the water. This bit of senseless exploitation, it turns out, is a tease. Denzel Washington, playing an ace A.T.F. agent, gets sent by a fabulous time machine to a period four days earlier so that he can try to prevent the deaths of the passengers and a beautiful young woman (Paula Patton). Scott directs the intricate science-fiction action with unusual precision but cuts each episode like crazy. The result is a jumpy, well-engineered nonsensical entertainment. With Jim Caviezel as a fanatical anti-government killer. Written by Bill Marsilii and Terry Rossio.—*D.D.* (12/11/06) (In wide release.)

DREAMGIRLS

Bill Condon's adaptation of the 1981 Broadway musical, the barely disguised tale of Berry Gordy and the rise of the Supremes in the sixties, has an irresistible momentum. There are written expository passages and photomontages chronicling the events of the period, but just about everything else is sung; the songs aren't commentary on the drama, they are the drama. The three women in the original group are played by Anika Noni Rose, Beyoncé Knowles, and Jennifer Hudson, who, as the oversized Effie, doesn't fit—she has a big, soulful voice and an even bigger mouth. She's thrown out but not forgotten, and Beyoncé, whom we had barely noticed at first, moves into the center of the movie. Based on that glamorous imp Diana Ross, she allows the Berry Gordy figure (Jamie Foxx) to dress her up as a swank mannequin but finally breaks free. In its way, the picture is a serious study of the issue of commercial packaging versus art. With Eddie Murphy, as a desperate soul singer loosely based on James Brown, and Danny Glover, as an aging business manager. Music by Henry Krieger; lyrics by Tom Eyen.—*D.D.* (12/25/06 & 1/1/07) (In wide release.)

THE GOOD GERMAN

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, a reporter named Jake Geismer (George Clooney) returns to Berlin, where he meets an old flame named Lena Brandt (Cate Blanchett). By coincidence, she is now the girlfriend of Geismer's young and unsavory driver (Tobey Maguire); her husband, presumed dead, used to work for the German V-2 program, which means that various interested parties would like to find her. Such is the tangled setup of Steven Soderbergh's new movie, which not only pays homage to the films of the period but makes a concerted effort to resemble them, from the glow of the monochrome images down to the shaky plainness of the credits. This is smart and endearing for a while, but you soon want to ask: why bother? Why seek to replicate back-projection, for instance, when those compelled to use it at the time would have been thrilled to find something more realistic? And, above all, is the Berlin of 1945, with its dense political divisions and its barely shifted burden of immense suffering, the right place in which to practice an artistic game? As if destabilized by these uncertainties, the main players lack definition; it is left to the supporting actors—notably Leland Orser, as an American war-crimes investigator—to summon the air of troubled inquiry that the story needs.—*A.L.* (12/18/06) (In wide release.)

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Robert De Niro's film about the rise of the C.I.A., from a brilliantly constructed screenplay by Eric Roth, is a sombre but fascinating social history of the agency and a meditation on the themes of trust and betrayal. Matt Damon, giving a recessive performance in the manner of Al Pacino's work in "Godfather II," is Edward Wilson, a Yale Skull and Bones member who gets inducted into the O.S.S. in 1939; he then spends the war in London working with a charming but treacherous Kim Philby-type British agent (Billy Crudup) and winds up in Washington as the agency's head of counterintelligence during the early Cold War period. A precise, selfless, and stolid man who operates, for all his shrewdness, in a fog of suspicion, he can't—or won't—protect those closest to him. The movie, whose wide-spanning plot (covering twenty-two years) is the working embodiment of paranoia, turns into Wilson's tragedy. With William Hurt and John Turturro as C.I.A. types, Angelina Jolie as the well-connected woman whom Wilson marries and then virtually abandons, and Oleg Stefan as an insinuating Soviet agent. The muted cinematography is by Robert Richardson.—*D.D.* (12/25/06 & 1/1/07) (In wide release.)

LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA

In the second half of Clint Eastwood's Iwo Jima pairing, the director tells the story of the gruesome battle again, this time from within the caves and tunnels that the Americans assaulted in "Flags of Our Fathers." Now the Japanese are the staunch heroes, and the Americans are the Other—faceless invaders hitting the island in overwhelming numbers. Eastwood, working with a screenplay by Iris Yamashita, is interested less in the actual fighting than in the fierce struggle between the death cultists among the Japanese and the common soldiers who merely want to survive. The movie is a little stiff and repetitive, but it's a stirringly noble and generous enterprise. Starring Ken Watanabe as General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, the commander of the Japanese resistance, and Kazunari Ninomiya as a soldier who wants to resume his life as a baker. In Japanese.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

MICHAEL

The Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1924 venture into the German film industry produced an engrossing hybrid of romantic decadence and spiritual austerity. The great and venerable artist Claude Zoret (Benjamin Christensen) lives in hothouse palatial splendor with his model, disciple, and adopted son, Michael (Walter Slezak). The fair-haired young sybarite, however, betrays his master for the exotic yet destitute Countess Zamikow (Nora Gregor), running up debts to fund their pleasures and selling Zoret's work behind his back. Michael's irrepressible and quasi-vampiric rise to happiness at Zoret's expense is brought to life in Dreyer's spontaneously expressive array of images. Closeups of burning intensity and opulent tableaux of frozen horror suggest the great director's transcendent theme, of divine grace granted and withheld. Silent.—*R.B.* (Anthology Film Archives; Jan. 3.)

NOTES ON A SCANDAL

A sensationally nasty and perceptive entertainment about sexual obsession and class. Judi Dench is the sixty-five-ish Barbara, a desperately lonely but formidable teacher in a dreary North London comprehensive school; Cate Blanchett is Sheba, her protégée at the school, a comfortable married bohemian who teaches art and falls in love with a cheeky fifteen-year-old working-class student (Andrew Simpson). Patrick Marber has adapted Zoe Heller's novel, which was written entirely from Barbara's point of view, and the material has now been cast in the third person; the camera observes all the characters objectively while Barbara's acerbic, self-deceiving narration wickedly frames the action. The suspense builds mercilessly as the guileless Sheba, whose placid existence is threatened by her heedless love affair, falls into the clutches of her devouring older "friend." Phillip Glass's swirling music presses the issue with unnecessary insistence. With Bill Nighy as Sheba's outraged husband. Directed by Richard Eyre.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

THE PAINTED VEIL

Marriage on the rocks, W. Somerset Maugham style. Set in nineteen-twenties China, the story concerns a stuffy bacteriologist (Edward Norton) who, discovering that his flirty wife (Naomi Watts) is having an affair, signs them up to work in a Chinese province that is suffering from a cholera epidemic. The seeming joint-suicide pact of the characters is played out in hushed, uncommunicative scenes that have the power of penance, and Norton's and Watts's performances are mutely intelligent. But when the film works in the political uprisings of the time and the redemptive power of their volunteer work (he finds the source of the disease, she takes care of orphaned children), it never heats up, and becomes gently lulling instead. The director, John Curran, and the screenwriter, Ron Nyswaner, have varnished away any trace of a rough edge. With Diana Rigg, still shining brightly, as the mother superior in charge of an orphanage.—*Bruce Diones* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE SECRET LIFE OF WORDS

Isabel Coixet directs this restrained drama, in which Hanna (Sarah Polley), an ascetic hearing-impaired factory worker, is forced to take a holiday, which she promptly forsakes to work as a nurse for a temporarily blind burn victim, Josef (Tim Robbins), on an oil rig in the Irish Sea. Although Coixet's distracting use of sound and music sets a disjointed tone, the persistent isolation of the few habitants of the rig enhances the gradual development of the relationship between the damaged Hanna and the angry, helpless Josef. The dual elements of terror and romance at the core of the story are realized beautifully by the two leads: Polley, as an empty shell of a person, and Robbins, as a feeling, sensitive man, bring to life a pair of lost souls attempting to live with untold past horrors.—*Shauna Lyon* (Quad Cinema.)

VENUS

Doing the "Grumpy Old Men" routine alongside several other showmen of his vintage, Peter O'Toole is as sly as ever as Maurice Russell, an aging and ailing actor who is a bit less grumpy than his friends, especially when it comes to Jessie (Jodie Whittaker), a provincial girl of twenty who moves in with her fussy great-uncle Ian, Maurice's best friend. About to go in for a prostate operation and in need of feminine comfort, Maurice makes the uncouth, slatternly young woman the nearest target for his seductions. Whittaker soldiers on bravely as the would-be Galatea, and Vanessa Redgrave, as his struggling ex-wife, whom he had left years earlier for a younger woman, is plausibly miserable, but it's O'Toole's vehicle, and it runs on the majestic flow of his voice (he makes even the word "cunt" sound like a term of endearment). Yet the screenwriter, Hanif Kureishi, and the director, Roger Michell, shamelessly milk the pathos of infirmity, lurching heedlessly from one prefabricated poignancy to another. The result is a schmaltzy grab bag of Hallmark moments.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

WE ARE MARSHALL

In West Virginia in 1970, most of the Marshall University football team, its coaches, and some supporters died in a tragic plane crash. The director McG's sports film, based on this real-life tragedy, is in turns inspirational, cloying, and sincere in dramatizing the shattered community's ambivalence about putting together a new team. When a teammate who was not on the flight (Anthony Mackie) convinces the university president (David Strathairn) to hire a new coach (played with heartland verve by Matthew McConaughey), the film takes a moving though somewhat clichéd look at the power of perseverance over grief. McG films all this in his snappy, light-infused style, which puts into high relief the characters' internal struggle about moving on with their lives. It's manipulative, but earnestly crowd-pleasing. The film ends with the first home-town game after the crash, a graceful note that's both an elegy and a rousing tribute.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

Also Playing

ERAGON: In wide release. **MISS POTTER:** In wide release. **NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM:** In wide release. **PERFUME:** Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas. **THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS:** In wide release. **ROCKY BALBOA:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"NewFilmmakers Presents." Jan. 3 at 6:30: "NY (See)" (2005, Lili White). ♦ Jan. 3 at 7:45: "God Links" (2006, Emily Fitzgerald). ♦ Jan. 3 at 9:15: "Bitter End" (2006, Michael Quilty). ♦ "Essential Cinema." Jan. 3 at 7: "Michael" (†). ♦ Jan. 4 at 7:30: "The Parson's Widow" (1921, Carl Theodor Dreyer; silent). ♦ Jan. 6 at 6:30: "Vampyr" (1931-32, Dreyer; in Danish without subtitles). ♦ Jan. 7 at 5: "Day of Wrath" (1943, Dreyer; in Danish without subtitles). ♦ Jan. 7 at 7: "Ordet" (1955, Dreyer; in Danish without subtitles). ♦ Special screenings. Jan. 5 at 7:30 and 9:30: "Musical Brotherhoods from the Trans-Saharan Highway" (2006, Hisham Mayet), followed by a Q. & A. with the director. ♦ Jan. 8 at 7:30: "The Blind Director" (1986, Alexander Kluge) and "Report" (1963-67, Bruce Conner).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Jan. 3-9 at 1, 3:45, 6:45, and 9:30: "Army of Shadows" (1969, Jean-Pierre Melville; in French). ♦ Through Jan. 11: The films of Woody Allen. Jan. 3 at 1, 5:10, and 9:20: "Husbands and Wives" (1992). ♦ Jan. 3 at 3:05 and 7:15: "Hannah and Her Sisters" (1986). ♦ Jan. 4 at 1, 4:35, and 8:10: "A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy" (1982). ♦ Jan. 4 at 2:50, 6:25, and 10: "Another Woman" (1988). ♦ Jan. 5-6 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:30: "Manhattan" (1979). ♦ Jan. 7-8 at 1, 4:25, and 7:50: "Take the Money and Run" (1969). ♦ Jan. 7-8 at 2:45, 6:15, and 9:35: "What's Up, Tiger Lily?" (1966). ♦ Jan. 9 at 1:10, 4:50, and 8:30: "Interiors" (1978). ♦ Jan. 9 at 3, 6:40, and 10:20: "Stardust Memories" (1980).

IFC CENTER

323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—In revival. Jan. 3-4 (call for showtimes): "Something Wild" (1961, Jack Garfein). ♦ Through Jan. 23: The films of Robert Altman. Jan. 5-6 at 2 and 7: "M*A*S*H" (1970). ♦ Jan. 7 at 2, 5:30, and 9: "Short Cuts" (1993). ♦ Jan. 8 at noon, 4, and 8:15: "Kansas City" (1996). ♦ Jan. 9 at noon, 4, and 8:15: "Thieves Like Us" (1974). ♦ Jan. 9 at 2:15, 6:30, and 10:30: "The Delinquents" (1957).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Still Moving," films from the museum's collections. Jan. 3-4 at 4:30: "Salt of the Earth" (1954, Herbert J. Biberman). ♦ "Recent Acquisitions: Universal Pictures." Jan. 4 at 6:30: "About a Boy" (2002, Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz). ♦ Jan. 3 at 8 and Jan. 8 at 6: "Man on the Moon" (1999, Milos Forman). ♦ Jan. 4 at 6:30 and Jan. 6 at 4: "Seabiscuit" (2003, Gary Ross). ♦ Jan. 6 at 2 and Jan. 8 at 8:30: "Bruce Almighty" (2003, Tom Shadyac). ♦ Jan. 6 at 7: "Out of Sight" (1998, Steven Soderbergh). ♦ Films scored by Franz Waxman. Jan. 3 at 6:15: "Paprika" (1932, Carl Boese; in German without subtitles). ♦ Jan. 3 at 8: "Mr. Skeffington" (1944, Vincent Sherman). ♦ Jan. 4 at 6:30: "Fury" (1936, Fritz Lang). ♦ Jan. 4 at 8:30 and Jan. 7 at 2: "Objective, Burma!" (1945, Raoul Walsh). ♦ Jan. 5 at 5:45: "The Spirit of St. Louis" (1957, Billy Wilder). ♦ Jan. 5 at 8:30:

JASHAR AWAN

"Sunset Blvd." (1950, Wilder). ♦ Jan. 6 at 2 and Jan. 8 at 6:30: "Crime in the Streets" (†). ♦ Jan. 6 at 4:15: "Edge of Darkness" (1943, Lewis Milestone). ♦ Jan. 6 at 7: "The Nun's Story" (1959, Fred Zinnemann). ♦ Jan. 7 at 5:15: "Mauvaise Graine" (1934, Wilder and Alexander Esway). ♦ Jan. 8 at 8:30: "Liliom" (1934, Lang; in French).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"Critics Choice: Great Documentaries." Jan. 6 at 2: "In the Year of the Pig" (1968-69, Emile de Antonio), introduced by David Fear. ♦ Jan. 6 at 4:30: "Winter Soldier" (1972, anonymous), introduced by Michael Atkinson. ♦ Jan. 7 at 2: "Hospital" (1970, Frederick Wiseman), introduced by Peter Rainer. ♦ Jan. 7 at 4: "Crumb" (†), introduced by John Anderson. ♦ "Repertory Nights." Jan. 6-7 at 6:30: "The Fallen Idol" (1948, Carol Reed).

PIONEER THEATRE
155 E. 3rd St. (212-591-0434)—Films from Croatia. Jan. 3-9 at 9: "I Love You" (2005, Dalibor Matanić; in Croatian).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." Jan. 5 at 9:30: "Destiny" (1997, Youssef Chahine; in Arabic and French), introduced by the filmmaker Parvez Sharma.

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." Jan. 5-6: "Layer Cake" (2004, Matthew Vaughn).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—In revival. Jan. 6 at 11 A.M. and 2: "Flipper" (1963, James Clark). ♦ Jan. 7 at 1 and 5:30: "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" (1972, Werner Herzog; in German).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Through Jan. 13: Dance on Camera Festival. Selected screenings. Jan. 3 at 6:15: Program 1, including "Josephine Baker: Black Diva in a White Man's World" (2006, Annette von Wangenheim; in English and French). ♦ Jan. 4 at 3:30: Program 3, including "Biped" (2006, Charles Atlas). ♦ Jan. 4 at 6 and Jan. 6 at 8:30: Program 4, including "Ezeiza" (2005, Andrea Servera). ♦ Jan. 4 at 8:30 and Jan. 6 at 3:30: Program 5, including "Cartes Postales" (2005, Richard Copans). ♦ Jan. 5-6 at 1: Program 6, including "Seasons of Migration" (2006, John Bishop). ♦ Jan. 5 at 3:30 and Jan. 7 at 1: Program 7, including "Terpsichore's Captives," parts 1 and 2 (1996-2005, Efim Reznikov). ♦ Jan. 5 at 6:15: Program 8, "The Color of Pomegranates (Sayat Nova)" (1969, Sergei Paradjanov; in Armenian). ♦ Jan. 7 at 4: Program 11, "Moving Bodies After Maya Deren," curated by Robert Haller, including "Meditations on Violence" (1948, Deren). ♦ Jan. 7 at 7: Program 12, including "Georgians in the Mariinsky" (2003, Zurab Inashvili).

READINGS AND TALKS

"ARTS & LEISURE WEEKEND"
The *Times* brings together journalists from its cultural pages to talk with Brice Marden, Richard Ford, Renée Fleming, and other noted artists, writers, and musicians. (Jan. 5-7. For more information, visit www.artsandleisureweekend.com. See also Night Life—Joe's Pub.)

WALTER READE THEATRE
Adrian Wootton, the C.E.O. of Film London and the editor of "Black Friday & Selected Stories," a new collection of David Goodis's short fiction, gives an illustrated lecture about the master of American noir who died forty years ago this month. (Lincoln Center. 212-875-5600. Jan. 8 at 8:30.)

92ND STREET Y
Dr. Kenneth Levin, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard and the author of "The Oslo Syndrome: Delusions of a People Under Siege," talks about the Arab-Israeli conflict with Richard Greenfield, the publisher of the *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Jan. 9 at 8:15.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

THREE KINGS DAY
El Museo del Barrio's thirtieth-annual Three Kings Day parade is set for Jan. 5, starting at 11 A.M. It is followed the next day, at 1:30, by a family celebration, featuring music, games, and prizes. (Fifth Ave. at 104th St. 212-831-7272.)

BRONX ZOO'S HOLIDAY LIGHTS
More than a hundred and fifty animal sculptures, including pink flamingos, frogs, and monkeys, are aglow at the Bronx Zoo. Each night there are ice-sculpture demonstrations, storytelling, and live reindeer. (Bronx River Parkway at Fordham Rd. 718-367-1010. Jan. 5-7.)

NEW YORK NATIONAL BOAT SHOW
The annual display known to inspire dreams of escape, adventure, and, at the very least, warmer weather continues through Jan. 7. (Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, Eleventh Ave. between 34th and 39th Sts. For more information, call 212-984-7000.)

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
NORTHERN LIGHTS
Jan. 12-14

The great Swedish cinematographer Sven Nykvist, who died in 2006, created the stark yet intimate look of Ingmar Bergman's films of the sixties and seventies and also had a busy international career. MOMA offers a trio of Nykvist's masterworks, including Bergman's "The Silence," Woody Allen's "Crimes and Misdemeanors," and "An-Magritt," from Norway, starring Liv Ullmann. (212-708-9480.)

THE THEATRE
COMING BACK
Jan. 17

During his long sabbatical from the theatre, Alan Ball wrote the screenplay for "American Beauty" and created the HBO series "Six Feet Under." His new play, "All That I Will Ever Be," will receive its world première at New York Theatre Workshop. (212-239-6200.)

ART
IN STITCHES
Jan. 25-June 17

An art-world trend of the past several years gets a thorough examination in the Museum of Arts & Design's "Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting," which includes work by twenty-seven artists who use (and subvert) traditional handicraft techniques like crochet, knitting, and tatting. (212-956-3535.)

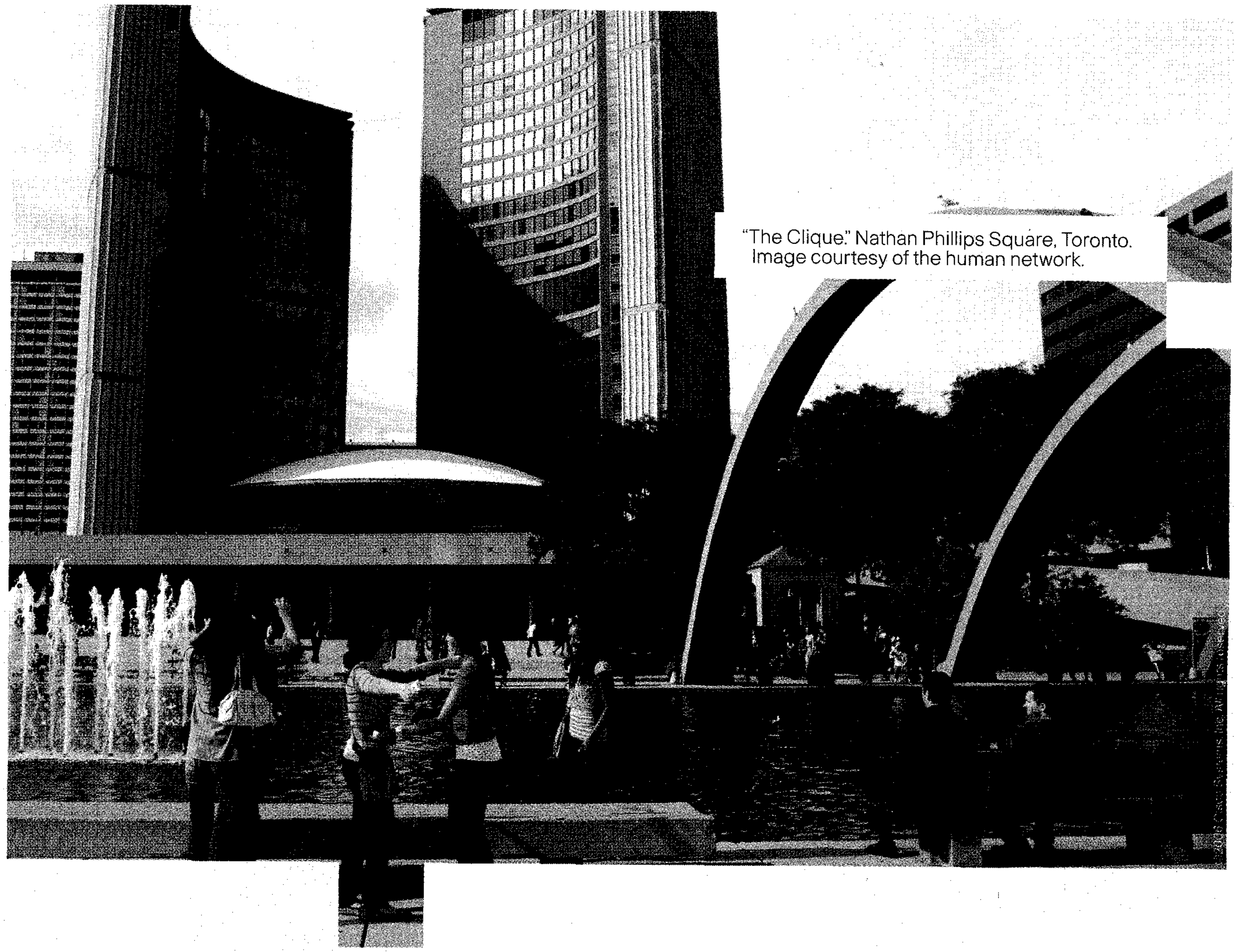
NIGHT LIFE
YOUNG FOLK
Feb. 1-4

The former Talking Heads front man, David Byrne, presents a number of performers, including Adem, Devendra Banhart, and CocoRosie, as part of his "Perspectives" festival at Carnegie Hall. (212-247-7800.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
CULT CLASSIC
Feb. 23-24

Who said it couldn't be done? Two Austrian masters of alienation, the composer Olga Neuwirth and the librettist Elfriede Jelinek, have adapted the David Lynch film "Lost Highway" for the lyric stage. It's just the thing for Miller Theatre, which presents the American première in association with Oberlin Conservatory. (212-854-7799.)

Miller Theatre presents an operatic adaptation of the David Lynch movie "Lost Highway."



"The Clique." Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto.
Image courtesy of the human network.

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
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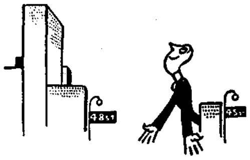
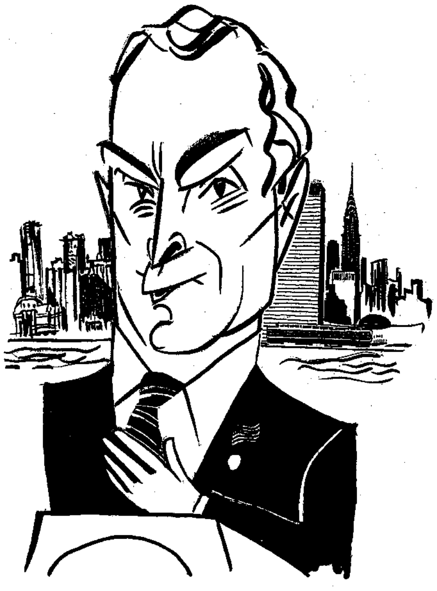


It is a sign of the times—which, a Greenwich Village bard once told us, change—that two former mayors of New York may run for President next year, and no one thinks that either candidacy is even slightly a joke. Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is thinking of running, as a Republican, and current Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who will be a former by then, may run as a None of the Above. This isn't just news; it's *news*. When, in the early nineteen-seventies, Mayor John Lindsay ran for the Presidency, his candidacy had about all the credibility that George W. Bush's would have today if *he* ran for mayor of Baghdad-on-the-Hudson (or Baghdad-on-the-Euphrates, for that matter).

What makes the idea of ascending from City Hall to the White House possible is the transformation of New York in the past twenty years—one of the largest civic transformations in American history, and certainly the most unexpected. (Theories credit everything from bright new waves of immigrants to grim forced marches of incarceration, and the sociologists can't decide which is right.) Just a few weeks ago, Mayor Bloomberg went out to the site of the 1964 World's Fair and made a peppy speech to introduce a new plan for the city, and what it ought to be like in 2030. He recited the roster of accomplishments that are by now as familiar as the stops on the No. 6 train: unemployment is the lowest it has been in years, the streets have never been cleaner, crime has never, or rarely, been rarer, and the city, which was shrinking, is growing—there will be about nine million New Yorkers a quarter century from now. More kids are graduating from high school, affordable housing is being built—not enough, but more than anywhere else in the country. The city's bond rating is up, and the money we get from it is going down into a new subway.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

It is hard for people who don't know what the city was like in the seventies or the early eighties to understand not only how different it seemed then but how tragically insoluble its problems were believed to be. (Lindsay's biography was called "The Ungovernable City.") As Bloomberg said in his speech, New York's decline and fall was for a long while taken for granted, as a fact of nature—and it is a useful reminder to pious liberals of the limits of liberal pieties that the unobtainable cure turned out to be a lot less hard to find than those pieties claimed. A series of booms, better policing, an insistence that the city's problems were things to be solved rather than fled: all this helped the transformation. Despite even 9/11—which turned out to change almost nothing in the city's interplay of money and manners—New York is in good shape, and getting better.

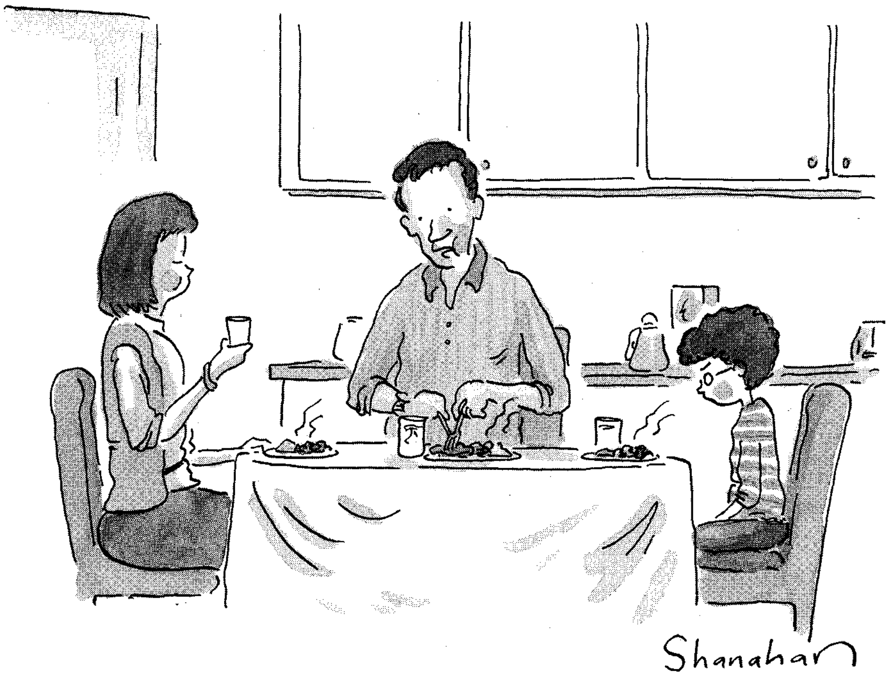


Most of the new plan for the future is admirable, and a lot of it is unexpectedly far-seeing and enlightened. The Mayor believes not just in growth but in green growth: the city will now have a Sustainability Advisory Board. We are already cleaning up the pipes that bring water to town from the reservoir, and are fooling around in Queens with soybean-based biofuels to warm our apartments organically. Of the perils of global warming, Bloomberg said, "It's called global warming, but the impact can be local," and he detailed a scheme to keep us from being washed away by another Katrina.

What seemed a little odd about the plan, and the speech, though, is that the one thing that leaves many New Yorkers worried, or at least uneasy, was nowhere mentioned—perhaps because the Mayor doesn't notice it, perhaps because that worry is a little metaphysical and almost poetic, resistant to oratory or city budget numbers. It is the sense that the city's recovery has come at the cost of a part of its identity: that New York is safer and richer but less like itself, an old lover who has gone for a face-lift and come out looking like no one in particular. The wrinkles are gone, but so is the face. This transformation is one you see on every street corner in Manhattan, and now in Brooklyn, too, where another local toy store or smoked-fish emporium disappears and another bank branch or mall store opens. For the first time in Manhattan's history, it has no bohemian frontier. Another bookstore closes, another theatre becomes a condo, another soulful place becomes a sealed residence. These are small things, but they are the small things that the city's soul clings to.

By a city we don't mean, or just mean, a place where many people live; we mean a place where many kinds of people live, all more or less on top of each other. Though Mrs. Astor knew nothing of the Lower East Side, and the Lower East Side could only dream of Mrs. Astor, they were still nodes on one grid. In the course of any even semiconscious wandering through the city—much less the kind of conscious wondering that marks the city's poetry and literature from Walt Whitman to Alfred Kazin and beyond—each group bumped visually and tangibly into the other. Only twenty-five years ago, a walk from Tribeca to SoHo and the Lower East Side would show as many kinds and classes—rich, aspiring, immigrant—as it had a century before; now that walk is likely to show only the same six stores and the same two banks and the same one shopper.

New York, as generations have been taught by the late Jane Jacobs, is a self-organizing place that fixes itself. But let the additional truth be told that though the life of the block is self-organizing, the block itself that lets life happen was made by the hand of a city planner. As the Mayor said, and knows, what we want the city to look like in 2030 will depend on the rules we make now. Aggressive policies for housing, especially low-income housing; a reasonable process of review to help neighborhoods remain neighborhoods; a less passive welcome to every form of monster store; more support for tenants and small merchants—all of these things are worth arguing for, and legislating for, too. This mayor, who came to power as the ultimate entrepreneurial capitalist, has been willing to impose rules—from banning smoking in bars to cutting out the trans fats in pastries—that make the city the kind of place he thinks it ought to be.



"And if you don't finish your vegetables Daddy will take you to a Knicks game."

The New York we imagine in 2030 is bound to be as different as this one is from the city we had in 1976, but we want it to be recognizably New York, mixed up, fragrant, and hopeful—middle-class in character, avant-garde in invitation, a place for plain people and pilgrims and plutocrats alike. The Mayor has promised a "major public outreach effort" to hear what people want, and one of the things that most ordinary New Yorkers want is to feel at home in their city, and only the regulating structure of the city itself can make that possible. It would not be the least of ironies in this still ironic but no longer entirely cynical city if this most capitalist-minded and free-market of mayors left as his legacy a reminder of the inestimable value of good government.

—*Adam Gopnik*

HERE TO THERE
WHEELS OF JUSTICE

Like the nanny scandals of the early nineties, several recent public disgraces have counted in common a menial theme—that of the professional driver. There was Yoko Ono's chauffeur, who either tried to extort money from his boss or was the victim of her sexual advances; Princess Diana's, who was ruled (once and for all) to be drunk on the night of the fatal wreck; and the state employee who was paid two hundred thousand dollars to cart around Alan Hevesi's wife. It seemed a good time to check in with Lauren Z. Asher, an up-and-coming Manhattan attorney whose livelihood necessitates the defense, rather than the requisitioning, of the ubiquitous black town car.

Taxis, too: Asher's official motto (emblazoned on ads and ballpoint pens) is "I Will Fight Your Traffic Tickets"; her unofficial motto, as asserted on a recent Wednesday at the D.M.V. Traffic Violations Bureau on Rector Street, is "I try to embrace whatever my motorist says." Asher, who speaks at Lamborghini speed and wears her brown hair swept back in a banana clip, is thirty-three. Last year, her second in solo practice, she handled

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around three thousand taxi and black-car cases, making her, as the editor of *Black Car News* said recently, "one of the biggies" in the field. In September, she opened an office on Eighth Avenue, a block up from a Lukoil station and near a couple of taxi stands.

It was 8:30 A.M., and Asher was examining the summons of Olusegun Victor Samuel, a Nigerian cabbie who'd been issued a summons for running a stop sign at the corner of Spring and Washington. "It's an unknown cop," she said—meaning one unfamiliar to her, and thus, likely, with the clubby ways of the D.M.V. court—"which is great for me." Suddenly, Asher ran down the hall, popping her head into a chamber designated Hearing Room 3. "I didn't want the case to get pulled," she explained.

Lauren Z. Asher

A few minutes later, the trial commenced. Asher, the defendant (wearing a maroon puffy jacket), and the officer who wrote the ticket stood in front of the bench. The officer read aloud from his notes:

> "I was on the northwest corner travelling eastbound, when I observed a Ford yellow taxi coming southbound down Washington Street. I observed the vehicle go through a marked stop sign approximately ten feet before the crosswalk and proceeded to pull the motorist over."

Asher made a motion to dismiss.

"Granted."

The officer apparently had not described the traffic signal in sufficient detail. "A stop sign's an eight-sided red sign with the word 'STOP' on it, has to face oncoming traffic, has to be posted near the corner," Asher said. "And he didn't get any of that."

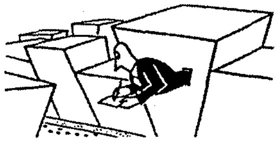
Asher's knowledge of New York City trafficana extends to specific intersections. "That turn in front of Penn Station, where you pick up on the right side and, if the passenger wants to go uptown, you need to make a left turn on Thirty-second Street," she began, scratching out a grid on a yellow legal pad. "My drivers can't really do that without making an unsafe lane change." She went on, "There was an officer, Kwaznaza, who used to write tickets on Twelfth Street near Greenwich Avenue. You beat him, and you'd go back to the attorneys' room and write his name and the date on the wall."

Asher's father, an attorney who lives in Scarsdale, initially disapproved of her chosen niche (which she stumbled upon after working for a divorce lawyer), but she thinks it's "funny." Because professional drivers are "bulk business," she charges them less than she does civilians. In appreciation, she has received such gifts as a Tiffany charm bracelet and, from a Pakistani client, a "giant muumuu." And though she compared the atmosphere to that of "Night Court"—"The judges spend all their time trying to get people to take off their hats"—the competition is intense. "I get a lot of people from African countries," she said. "Somebody else has the Bangladeshis." Asher even offers curbside consultations: taxis full of cabdrivers pull up on Rector Street, present her with all their tickets, and then speed away.

Customer service, according to Victor Dizengoff—the executive director of the Black Car Assistance Corporation—is what distinguishes black cars from their yellow counterparts. Their drivers, he said, learn "how to pick a client up in front of a certain building: whether they have a side or front entrance, which blocks you can stop in front of, which has a line, like Lehman Brothers on Broadway, or Deutsche in front of 60 Wall." In his driving days, Dizengoff sometimes chauffeured the investment banker Robert Greenhill. Several weeks ago, the owner of a body shop totalled Greenhill's four-hundred-thousand-dollar Porsche Carrera GT as he was delivering it back to Greenwich. Asher may hear from him.

—*Lauren Collins*

CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEPT.
RAP MAP



From water pipes to porn shops, cartographers have charted almost every aspect of local urban life, giving rise to a sort of cottage industry: the New York City specialty map. The latest—and one you are not likely to see unless you run in criminal-justice circles—is a rendering of the city that breaks down, block by block, the home addresses of all New Yorkers incarcerated in a given year. This map won't get you from Century 21 to the Met. But it does reveal that more prison-bound Bronx residents lived in walkups than in any other type of building, that Staten Island is the most law-abiding borough, and that Brooklyn—nicknamed "the borough of churches"—ran up the state's highest bill in prison costs.

Eric Cadora and Charles Swartz, co-founders of the Brooklyn-based Justice Mapping Center, collaborated on the project with an architect named Laura Kurgan, at Columbia's Spatial Information Design Lab. "What started out as a scholarly inquiry has turned into a national initiative," said Cadora, whose team has mapped twelve cities so far. Their New York is a digital crazy quilt of "bright-against-black": the areas least touched by incarceration in 2003, the year they chose to study (Riverdale, Bay Ridge, the West Village), appear black and gray; those more so (Coney Island, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Hell's Kitchen) neon orange.

Recently, the mapmakers gathered at Columbia, and Cadora, a substantially built man with a fondness for Camel Lights, turned the face of his laptop to reveal the map. "Zero-value areas"—places where no one went to prison—were shaded black. "You see them crop up all across the city, but they never make up an entire neighborhood," he said, invoking what might otherwise be a bragging point among New Yorkers: "There is always something going on somewhere." The exceptions? "What I jokingly call 'the Mafia neighborhoods' of South Brooklyn," he said, "where you've got one or two guys going away from an entire neighborhood. Also, this." He pointed to a dark strip of the Upper East

Side—the blocks in the Seventies and Eighties that border Central Park.

Just above was Harlem, the area with the highest rate of incarceration in the city: forty-four people from a single block along East 120th Street headed upstate. Such high-density spots are known as million-dollar blocks, because it takes upward of that in state expenditures to pay for their residents' lockups. They are, unfailingly, in the city's poorest neighborhoods—Brownsville, the South Bronx, and South Jamaica among them—great splashes of orange, by the map's gauge.

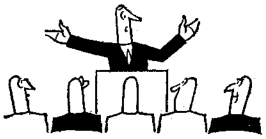
Cadora and his team calculated every block's prison costs by multiplying the minimum sentence of each incarcerated person by his estimated annual prison fees ($32,400), then adding these numbers together. By this logic, a serial killer on Fifth Avenue who gets a life sentence could make up his own million-dollar block. The borough with the most million-dollar blocks is Manhattan ("mainly because the blocks are so small"); the city's most expensive block in 2003, a housing project along Harlem River Drive, not far from Yankee Stadium, cost the state $6.2 million and had forty-nine of its six hundred and eighty-nine male residents put behind bars.

The map's data are largely gleaned from prison entry forms. Early in the study, Cadora noticed that an inordinate amount of people gave the same home address, in Queens. Curious, he looked up the address and found not a residential building but an institution: Rikers Island. Why so many New Yorkers would call a jail known as the House of Pain home is "a whole 'nother story," Cadora said. "A lot are probably homeless, and one of the hugest problems for anyone coming out of prison is finding a place to live." Cadora and his team believe that their map depicts a system spending millions to imprison people but little on the communities to which they return.

Cadora clicked on a map of New York State that charted the migration patterns of Brooklyn criminals: thousands of lines sprang from Kings County to prisons all over—Attica, Watertown, Great Meadow. The image was striking, like a bird's spread wing. ("We've had art galleries ask to exhibit the maps," Kurgan said.) Cadora has been pleased by the reaction of legislators. "It's no longer just about getting tough or being soft on crime," he said. "It's 'What are we going to do about Bed-Stuy?' "

—*Lauren MacIntyre*

DEPT. OF DISCOURSE
OXFORD ON THE HUDSON



The name of Robert Rosenkranz, the businessman and philanthropist, is not universally recognized, even on Park Avenue. "I know a variety of Rosenkranzes—which one is he?" asked Robert Albertson, a principal at Sandler O'Neill, as he mingled at a reception at the Asia Society and Museum the other evening.

This Rosenkranz was picking up the tab for the reception, and also for the formal debate that followed it in the society's theatre, on the proposition "Hollywood has fuelled anti-Americanism abroad." Rosenkranz, who is reminiscent, in his build, wardrobe, and winter tan, of Michael Bloomberg in his pre-populist incarnation, is the chairman of Delphi Financial Group. He is also the sponsor of Intelligence Squared U.S., a spinoff of a debate series that originated in London in 2002. The British version has presented debates on such topics as "Enough money has been spent saving Venice" and "Foreign aid to poor countries has done more harm than good." Rosenkranz hopes that his debates—modelled on those conducted at the Oxford Union, with three speakers for the motion and three against, holding forth for eight minutes apiece—will provide an Athenian tonic to a public discourse coarsened by Bill O'Reilly-style incivility.

Before the recent debate (admission forty dollars) at the Asia Society, Deirdre Byrne, a former litigator who now sells real estate in the Hamptons for Sotheby's, explained the series' appeal. "There is no intellectual component in my work, so I have to seek it out somewhere," she said. Richard Huber, the former C.E.O. of Aetna, who now has business interests ranging from wine and ice-breaking in Chile to supermarkets and emerald mines in Brazil, said that the format promised to be much more enlivening than the snoozy events offered by the Council on Foreign Relations, of which he is also a member. "They tend to be pronouncements," he said.

The debate was not entirely devoid of pronouncements, the debaters largely lacking the oratorical light-footedness that is the hallmark of an Oxford Union speaker. (The platonic ideal of such a debater, Christopher Hitchens, had been conscripted earlier in the season, to advocate that "Freedom of expression must include the license to offend.") Roger Kimball, speaking in favor of the proposition, leaned toward quasi-British bombast, characterizing anti-Americanism as "a rank garden" for which Hollywood "merely supplies a layer of what you might call fructified manure." Richard Walter, who is the chairman of U.C.L.A.'s screenwriting program, spoke against the motion, in the vernacular of the benighted community in question. "Most art sucks—excuse me," he said. He pointed out that sex and violence are not new to entertainment, noting the bloodbaths in "Hamlet" and "Macbeth." "This was not invented by eleven Jews at Paramount Studios a couple of weeks ago," he said. Victory went to Walter's team, which escaped penalty when a team member's cell phone went off during the proceedings. ("I have Spielberg on the line," she said.)

After the debate, S.U.V. limos ferried participants to Daniel, where the conversation continued over seared tuna and roast duck. Alexandra Munroe, Rosenkranz's wife and a curator at the Guggenheim, discussed whether movies could be categorized as art with Thomas Struth, the photographer (whose work she and Rosenkranz recently added to their collection), while Pamela Wallin, the former Canadian consul general, and Ted Kotcheff, who directs "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit," speculated about whether Angelina Jolie has a Middle East adviser. (If she doesn't, Barbra Streisand certainly does, they decided.) Byron Wien, who was the chief investment strategist at Morgan Stanley for twenty-one years and is now the chief investment strategist for a hedge fund, said that he had been persuaded by the motion's opponents, despite believing that their position was fundamentally flawed. "If you took the whole product of Hollywood, good and bad, and netted it out, it would be a negative for America," he said. But he was relieved that the debate provided a respite from the conversations he usually experiences at social events. "I was at a dinner last week," he said, "and all you hear about is Palm Beach and having the right caterer."

—*Rebecca Mead*

THE FINANCIAL PAGE

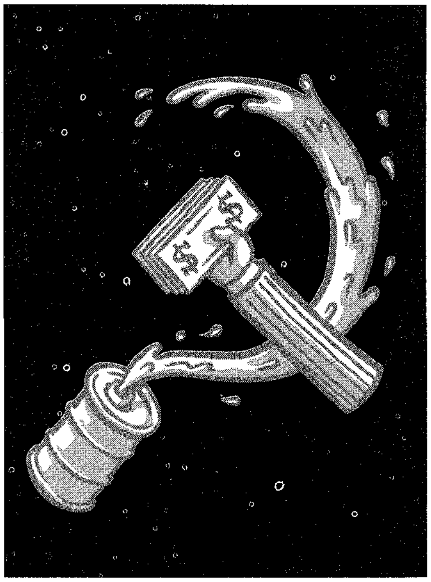
SYNERGY WITH THE DEVIL

A year ago, progressive activists and policy wonks descended upon Caracas, Venezuela, for the World Social Forum, a kind of Davos conference for the global left. People packed into the Caracas Hilton to listen to panel discussions on the evils of neoliberalism and the threat posed by U.S. hegemony, and Hugo Chávez, the President of Venezuela, gave a speech to a crowd of some ten thousand in which he called for "socialism or death." It was a striking demonstration of Chávez's importance as an anti-capitalist symbol. And yet, only six months earlier, in the very same hotel, Chávez's government had hosted a rather different meeting of international luminaries. The attendees were American businessmen, and the meeting was a trade fair intended to convince American companies that Venezuela was friendly to foreign investment and eager to expand trade with the U.S.

To people on both the left and the right, Hugo Chávez is a kind of modern-day Castro, a virulently anti-American leader who has positioned himself as the spearhead of Latin America's "Bolivarian revolution." He calls for a "socialism of the twenty-first century," and regularly floats radical economic ideas; during his recent campaign for reëlection, he suggested he might move Venezuela to a barter system. When he spoke in front of the United Nations General Assembly in September, a day after President Bush, he said, "The devil came here yesterday." And, just last month, after he was overwhelmingly reëlected to the Presidency, he dedicated the victory to Castro and proclaimed it "another defeat for the devil who tries to dominate the world."

Chávez's rhetoric might not be out of place in "The Little Red Book," yet everyday life for many Venezuelans today looks more like the Neiman-Marcus catalogue. Thanks to the boom in the price of oil, many Venezuelans have been indulging in rampant consumerism that might give even an American pause. In the past year, auto sales have doubled, property prices have soared (mortgage loans are up three hundred per cent), and, thanks to this buying frenzy, credit-card loans have nearly doubled. And while Chávez has done a good job of redistributing oil revenue to the Venezuelan poor, via so-called *misiones*, designed to improve education, health care, and housing, and has forced oil companies to renegotiate contracts, there has been no nationalization of industry, relatively little interference with markets, and only small gestures toward land reform. If this is socialism, it's the most business-friendly socialism ever devised.

Even stranger, Chávez's demonization of the U.S. has had little or no impact on business between the two countries. The U.S. continues to be Venezuela's most important trading partner. Much of this business is oil: Venezuela is America's fourth-largest supplier, and the U.S. is Venezuela's largest customer. But the flow of trade goes both ways and across many sectors. The U.S. is the world's biggest exporter to Venezuela, responsible for a full third of its imports. The Caracas skyline is decorated with Hewlett-Packard and Citigroup signs, and Ford and G.M. are market leaders there. And, even as Chávez's rhetoric has become more extreme, the two countries have become more entwined: trade between the U.S. and Venezuela has risen thirty-six per cent in the past year.



Chávez has been the beneficiary of excellent timing: oil prices have quintupled since he took over, allowing him to hand out billions of dollars to the poor. But he has done little to diversify the nation's industrial base and lessen the economy's dependence on oil, while his few tepid ventures into state ownership or coöperatives will have no meaningful economic impact. The result is that the ties between the U.S. and Venezuela have actually tightened. And there is only so much Chávez could do to loosen them without wrecking his economy; most Venezuelan oil is heavy with sulfur, and the refineries that are best equipped to handle it are in the U.S. It's far easier and cheaper to ship oil from the Orinoco Basin to Corpus Christi than to a refinery in Shanghai. In any case, it's far from clear that most Venezuelans want those ties loosened at all; Venezuela has traditionally been more America-friendly than other South American countries. Baseball is bigger in Venezuela than soccer, and there are Subway and McDonald's franchises throughout the country.

The paradox is that Chávez's anti-Americanism is central to his global appeal, while American consumers and companies are central to the economic performance of his regime. So, while he's going around the world giving speeches about how the goose should be killed, he relies on the golden eggs to keep himself in power. This may seem like a state of affairs that can't last, and Chávez's supporters and detractors alike assume that, soon enough, his deeds will begin to live up to his rhetoric: he'll cut off oil supplies to the U.S., or the like. But deep-seated ideological and political hostility between countries is often less of an obstacle to trade than you might think. Japan, for instance, is South Korea's second-largest trading partner, despite the fact that Korean resentment toward Japan runs very high, thanks to a long history of Japanese imperialism in the region. China, meanwhile, treats Taiwan as a rebel province, and has threatened military action if it attempts to declare independence, but foreign trade between the two countries totals nearly sixty-five billion dollars. Trade does not, as Enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Paine believed, always bring peace in its wake, "operating to cordialize mankind." (Think, after all, of the First World War.) But the benefits of trade often excuse even the most grievous of sins. Sometimes, it just makes sense to deal with the devil.

—*James Surowiecki*

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

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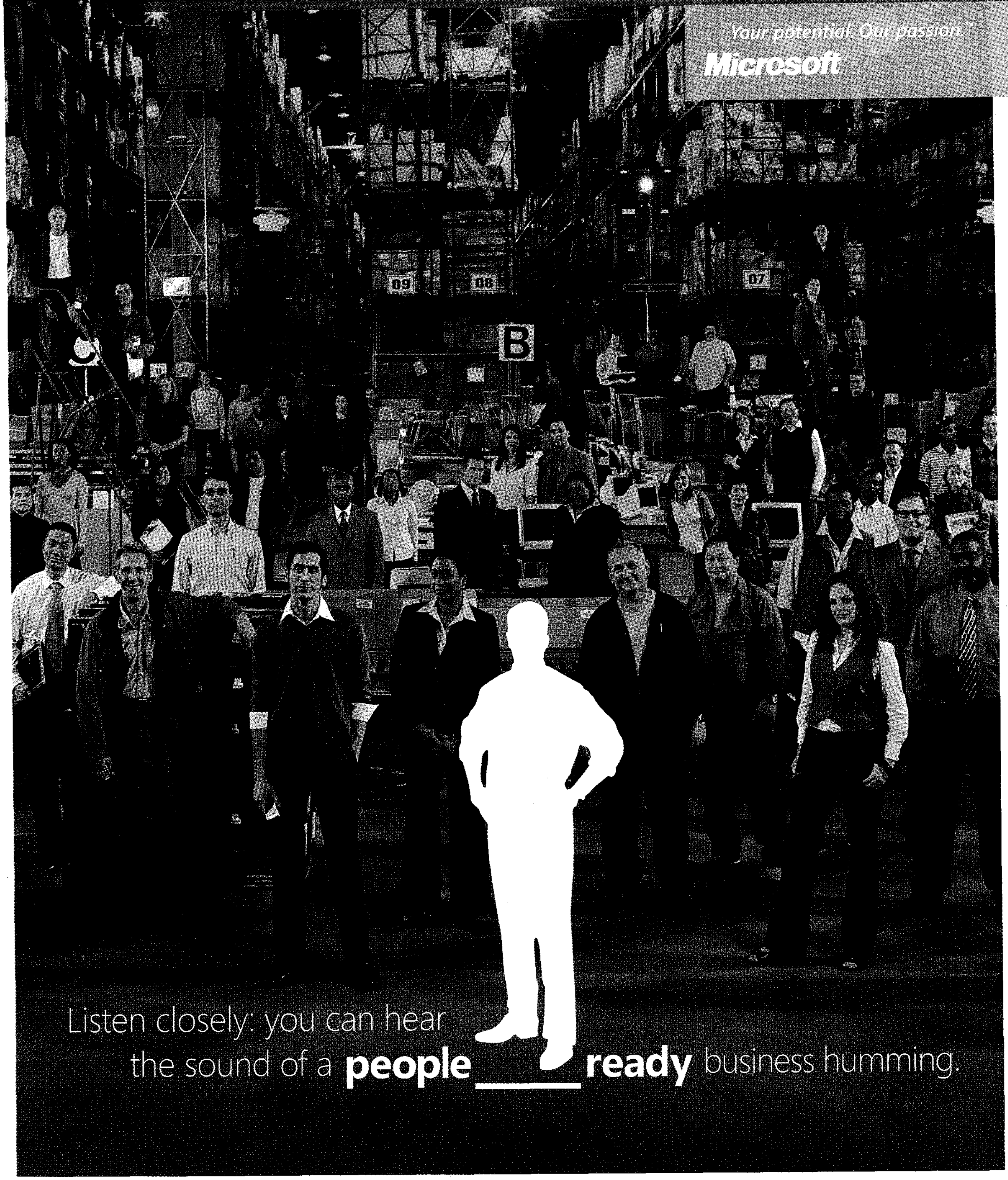
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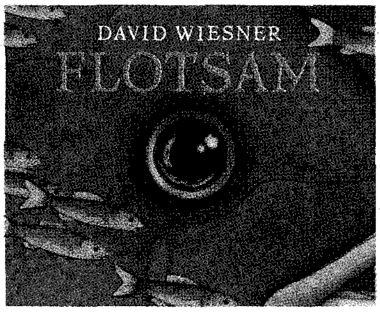

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REFLECTIONS

DIE WELTLITERATUR

How we read one another.

BY MILAN KUNDERA

MAXIMUM DIVERSITY IN MINIMUM SPACE

A European, whether he is nationalist or cosmopolitan, rooted or uprooted, is profoundly conditioned by his relation to his homeland; the national problematic may be more complex, more grave in Europe than elsewhere, but in any case it is different there. Added to that is another particularity: alongside the large nations, Europe contains small nations, several of which have, in the past two centuries, attained or reattained their political independence. Their existence may be what brought me to understand that cultural diversity is the great European value. In the period when the Russian world tried to reshape my small country in its image, I formulated my own ideal of Europe thus: *maximum diversity in minimum space.* The Russians no longer rule my native land, but that ideal is even more imperilled now.

All the nations of Europe are living out a common destiny, but each is living it out differently, based on its own distinct experience. This is why the history of each European art (painting, the novel, music, and so on) seems like a relay race in which the various nations pass the baton from one to the next. Polyphonic music had its beginnings in France, continued its development in Italy, attained incredible complexity in the Netherlands, and reached its fulfillment in Germany, in the works of Bach; the upwelling of the English novel of the eighteenth century is followed by the era of the French novel, then by the Russian novel, then by the Scandinavian, and so on. The dynamism and long life span of the history of the European arts are inconceivable without the existence of all these nations whose diverse experiences constitute an inexhaustible reservoir of inspiration.

I think of Iceland. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a literary work thousands of pages long was born there: the sagas. At the time, neither the French nor the English had created such a prose work in their national tongue! We should certainly ponder this thoroughly: the first great prose treasure of Europe was created in its smallest nation, which even today numbers fewer than three hundred thousand inhabitants.

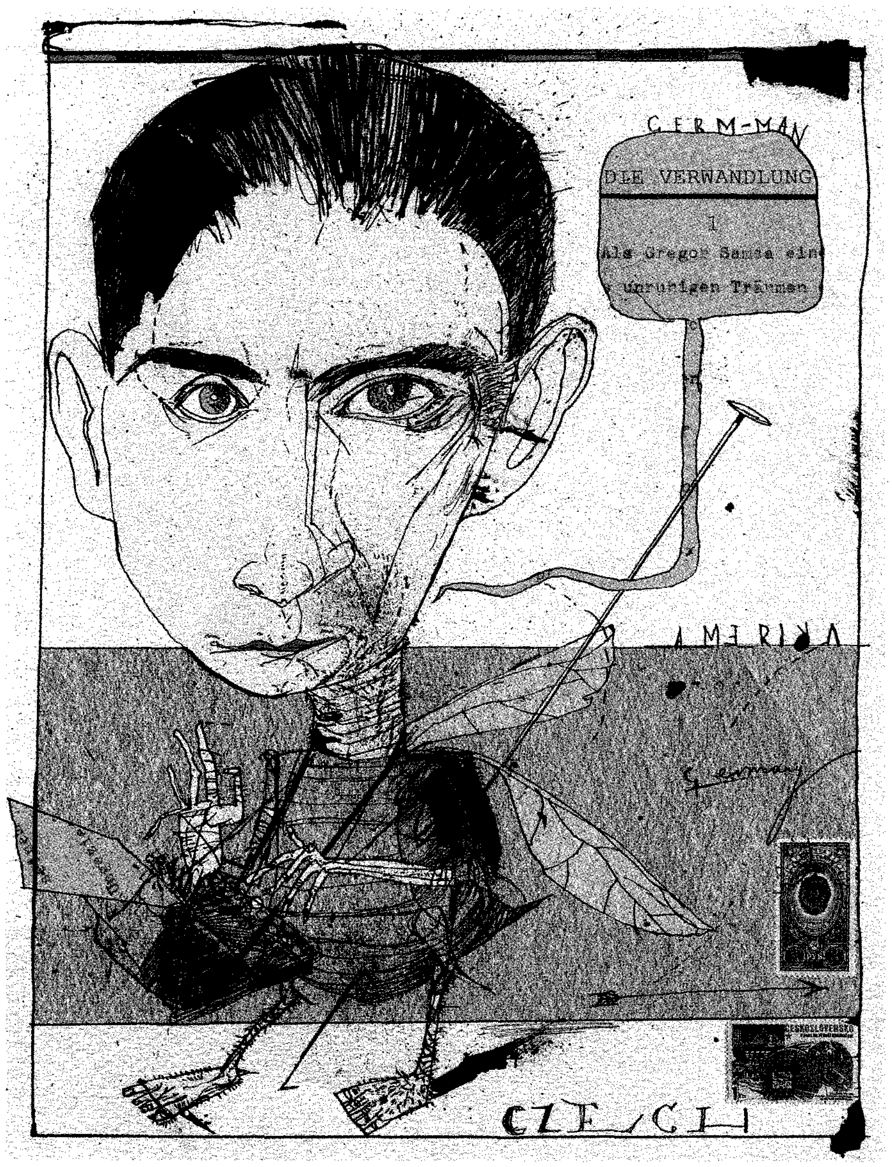
IRREPARABLE INEQUALITY

The word "Munich" has become the symbol of capitulation to Hitler. But to be more concrete: at Munich, in the autumn of 1938, the four great nations of Europe—Germany, Italy, France, and Great Britain—negotiated the fate of a small country to which they denied the very right to speak. In a room apart, the two Czech diplomats waited all night to be led, in the early morning, down long hallways into a room where Chamberlain and Daladier, weary, blasé, yawning, informed them of the death sentence.

"A faraway country" of which "we know nothing": Those famous words by which Chamberlain sought to justify the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia were accurate. In Europe, there are the large countries on one side and the small on the other; there are the nations seated in the negotiating chambers and those which wait all night in the antechambers.

What distinguishes the small nations from the large is not the quantitative criterion of the number of their inhabitants; it is something deeper. For the small nations, existence is not a self-evident certainty but always a question, a wager, a risk; they are on the defensive against History, that force which is bigger than they, which does not take them into account, which does not even notice them. ("It is only by opposing History as such that we can oppose today's history," Witold Gombrowicz wrote.)

There are almost as many Poles as



A citizen of the new Czechoslovakia, Kafka considered himself a German writer.

DAVID HUGHES

there are Spaniards. But Spain is an old power whose existence has never been under threat, whereas History has taught the Poles what it means not to exist. Deprived of their state, they lived for more than a century on death row. "Poland has not *yet* perished" is the poignant first line of their national anthem, and, in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz some fifty years ago, Gombrowicz wrote a phrase that could never have occurred to any Spaniard: "If, in a hundred years, our language still exists . . ."

Let's suppose that the Icelandic sagas had been written in English: their heroes' names would be as familiar to us as Tristan or Don Quixote; their singular aesthetic character, oscillating between chronicle and fiction, would have provoked all sorts of theories; people would have argued over whether they should or should not be considered the first European novels. I don't mean to say that the sagas have been forgotten—after centuries of indifference they are now being studied in universities throughout the world—but they belong to the "archeology of letters," they do not influence living literature.

Given that the French are unused to distinguishing between nation and state, I often hear Kafka described as a Czech writer. Of course that is nonsense. Although from 1918 on he was, indeed, a citizen of the newly constituted Czechoslovakia, Kafka wrote solely in German, and he considered himself a German writer. But suppose for a moment that he had written his books in Czech. Today, who would know them? It took Max Brod twenty years and enormous effort to force Kafka on the world's awareness, and that was with the support of the greatest German writers! Even if a Prague editor had managed to publish the books of a hypothetical Czech Kafka, none of his compatriots (that is to say, no Czech) would have had the authority needed to familiarize the world with those extravagant texts written in the language of a "faraway country" of which "we know nothing." No, believe me, nobody would know Kafka today—nobody—if he had been Czech.

Gombrowicz's "Ferdydurke" was published in Polish in 1937. It had to wait fifteen years finally to be read, and rejected, by a French publisher. And it took a good many years more for the French to see his work in their bookstores.

DIE WELTLITERATUR

There are two basic contexts in which a work of art may be placed: either in the history of its nation (we can call this *the small context*) or else in the supranational history of its art (*the large context*). We are accustomed to seeing music quite naturally in *the large context:* knowing what language Orlando di Lasso or Bach spoke matters little to a musicologist. But because a novel is bound up with its language, in nearly every university in the world it is studied almost exclusively in *the small*—national—*context*. Europe has not managed to view its literature as a historical unit, and I continue to insist that this is an irreparable intellectual loss. Because, if we consider only the history of the novel, it was to Rabelais that Laurence Sterne was reacting, it was Sterne who set off Diderot, it was from Cervantes that Fielding drew constant inspiration, it was against Fielding that Stendhal measured himself, it was Flaubert's tradition living on in Joyce, it was through his reflection on Joyce that Hermann Broch developed his own poetics of the novel, and it was Kafka who showed García Márquez the possibility of departing from tradition to "write another way."

What I just said Goethe was the first to say: "National literature no longer means much these days, we are entering the era of *Weltliteratur*"—world literature—"and it is up to each of us to hasten this development." This is, so to speak, Goethe's testament. Another testament betrayed. Open any text-book, any anthology: world literature is always presented as a juxtaposition of national literatures . . . as a history of literatures! Literatures in the plural!

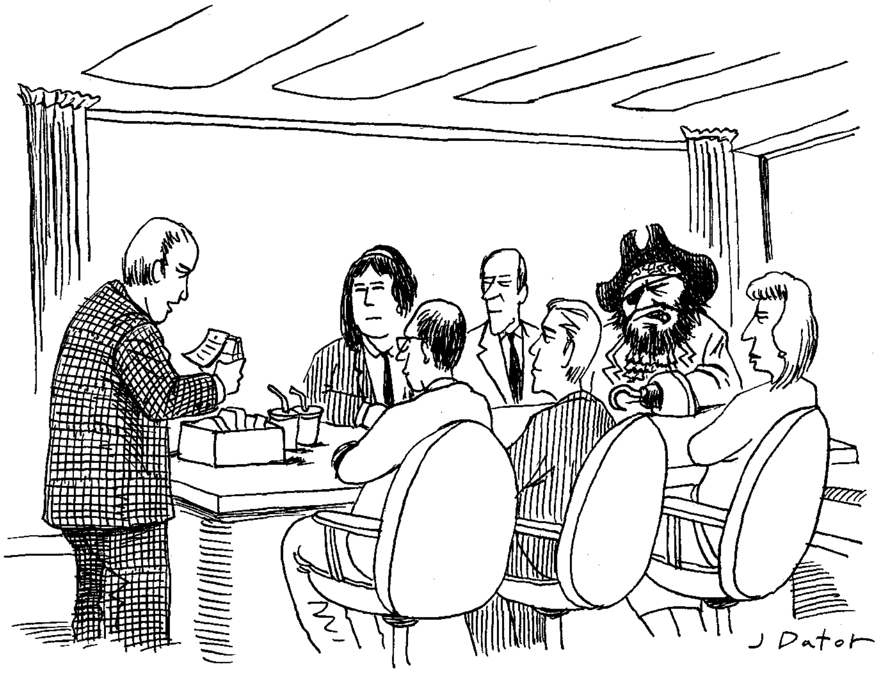
And yet Rabelais, ever undervalued by his compatriots, was never better understood than by a Russian, Bakhtin; Dostoyevsky than by a Frenchman, Gide; Ibsen than by an Irishman, Shaw; Joyce than by an Austrian, Broch. The universal importance of the generation of great North Americans—Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos—was first brought to light by the French. ("In France I'm the father of a literary movement," Faulkner wrote in 1946, complaining of the deaf ear he encountered in his own country.) These few examples are not bizarre exceptions to the rule; no, they *are* the rule. Geographic distance sets the observer back from the local context and allows him to embrace *the large context* of *world literature*—the only approach that can bring out a novel's *aesthetic value*—that is to say, the previously unseen aspects of existence that this particular novel has managed to make clear, the novelty of form it has found.

Do I mean by this that to judge a novel one can do without a knowledge of its original language? Indeed, I do mean exactly that! Gide did not know Russian, Shaw did not know Norwegian, Sartre did not read Dos Passos in the original. If the books of Gombrowicz and Danilo Kiš had depended solely on the judgment of people who read Polish and Serbo-Croatian, their radical aesthetic newness would never have been discovered.

(And what about the professors of foreign literatures? Is it not their very natural mission to study works in the context of world literature? Not a chance. In order to demonstrate their competence as experts, they make a great point of identifying with *the small*—national—*context* of whichever literature they teach. They adopt its opinions, its tastes, its prejudices. It is in foreign universities that a work of art is most intractably mired in its home province.)

THE PROVINCIALISM OF SMALL NATIONS

How to define "provincialism"? As the inability (or the refusal) to see one's own culture in *the large context.* There are two kinds of provincialism: that of large nations and that of small ones. The large nations resist the Goethean idea of world literature because their own literature seems to them sufficiently rich that they need take no interest in what people write elsewhere. Kazimierz Brandys says, in his "Paris Notebooks: 1985–87," that the French student has greater gaps in his knowledge of world culture than the Polish student, but he can get away with it, for his own culture contains more or less all the aspects, all the possibilities and phases, of the world's evolution.



"Who ordered the bravest tuna on all the seven seas, anointed with the spice of faraway lands, on wheat toast?"

Small nations are reticent toward *the large context* for exactly the opposite reason: they hold world culture in high esteem but feel it to be something alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible, an ideal reality with little connection to their national literature. The small nation inculcates in its writer the conviction that he belongs to that place alone. To set his gaze beyond the boundary of the homeland, to join his colleagues in the supranational territory of art, is considered pretentious, disdainful of his own people. And, since the small nations are often in situations where their survival is at stake, they can easily present this attitude as morally justified.

Kafka speaks of this in his "Diaries." From the standpoint of a "large" literature—in this case, German—he observes Yiddish and Czech literature: a small nation, he says, has great respect for its writers because they provide it with pride "in the face of the hostile surrounding world"; for a small nation, literature is "less a matter of literary history" than "a matter of the people," and that exceptional osmosis between the literature and its people facilitates "the literature's diffusion throughout the country, where it binds with political slogans." From there Kafka arrives at this startling observation: "What in large literatures goes on at a lower level and constitutes a not indispensable basement of the structure, here takes place in bright light; what there provokes a brief flurry of interest, here brings down nothing less than a life-or-death decree."

These last words remind me of a chorus by the composer Bedřich Smetana (written in Prague in 1864) with the lines "Rejoice, rejoice, voracious raven, you have a treat in store: soon you will feast on a traitor to our country." How could such a great musician ever offer up such bloodthirsty foolishness? Was it some youthful error? No excuse there—he was forty when he wrote it. And, moreover, what did it even mean at the time, to be "a traitor to our country"? Someone joining a commando band to slit the gullets of his fellow-citizens? Not at all: a "traitor" was any Czech who decided to leave Prague for Vienna and participate peacefully in German life there. As Kafka said, what somewhere else "provokes a brief flurry of interest, here brings down nothing less than a life-or-death decree."

A nation's possessiveness toward its artists works as a *small-context terrorism* that reduces the entire meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland. I open an old mimeographed copy of some lectures that the composer Vincent d'Indy gave at the Paris Schola Cantorum, where a whole generation of French musicians were trained in the early twentieth century. There are paragraphs on Smetana and Dvořák, particularly on Smetana's two string quartets. What are we told? A single assertion, restated several times in different terms: this "folk-style" music was inspired "by national songs and dances." Nothing else? Nothing. A platitude and a misinterpretation. A platitude because traces of folk music are found everywhere, in Haydn, in Chopin, in Liszt, in Brahms; a misinterpretation because Smetana's two quartets are actually a highly personal musical confession, written under tragic circumstances—the composer had just lost his hearing, and these (splendid!) quartets are, he said, "the swirling storm of music in the head of a man gone deaf."

How could Vincent d'Indy have been so deeply mistaken? Very likely he was unfamiliar with those works and was simply repeating what he had heard. His opinion reflected Czech society's idea of these two composers: to make political use of their fame (to display pride "in the face of the hostile surrounding world"), it had pulled together the scraps of folklore to be found in the music and stitched them into a national banner to fly above the work. The outside world was just accepting politely (or maliciously) the interpretation that was offered.

THE PROVINCIALISM OF LARGE NATIONS

And what about provincialism in the large nations? The definition is the same: the inability (or the refusal) to imagine one's own culture in *the large context*. A few years ago, before the end of the past century, a Paris newspaper polled thirty figures who belonged to a kind of intellectual establishment of the day: journalists, historians, sociologists, publishers, and a few writers. Each was asked to name, in order of importance, the ten most notable books in the whole history of France, and from those combined thirty lists the paper compiled an honor roll of a hundred works. Even though the question as asked ("What are the books that have made France what it is?") might allow for several interpretations, still the response does give a rather good picture of what today's French intellectual élite considers important in its country's literature.

Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables" came in first. That surprised one foreign writer. Never having considered the book important, either for himself or for the history of literature, he suddenly saw that the French literature he adores is not the same one the French adore. In eleventh place is de Gaulle's war memoirs. Such value would almost never be accorded to a book by a statesman, a soldier, outside of France. And yet what is disconcerting is not that but the fact that the greatest masterpieces appear only farther down the list! Rabelais stands in fourteenth place—Rabelais after de Gaulle! I am reminded of an article I read by an eminent French university professor saying that his country's literature lacks a founding figure equivalent to Dante for the Italians, Shakespeare for the English, and so on. Imagine—in the eyes of his countrymen, Rabelais lacks the aura of a founding figure! Yet in the eyes of nearly every great novelist of our time he is, along with Cervantes, the founder of an entire art, the art of the novel.

And what of the eighteenth- and the nineteenth-century novel, France's glory? "The Red and the Black" stands twenty-second on the list; "Madame Bovary" is twenty-fifth; "Germinal" thirty-second; "The Human Comedy" only thirty-fourth (Is that possible? "The Human Comedy," without which European literature is inconceivable!); "Dangerous Liaisons" fiftieth; poor "Bouvard and Pécuchet" come trailing in last, like a couple of breathless dunces. And some masterworks do not appear at all among the hundred elect: "The Charterhouse of Parma"; "Sentimental Education"; "Jacques the Fatalist" (true, only within *the large context* of world literature can the incomparable novelty of that book be appreciated).

And what about the twentieth century? Proust's "In Search of Lost Time," seventh place. Camus's "The Stranger," tied for twenty-second. And after that? Very little. Very little of what's called modern literature, nothing at all of modern poetry. As if France's enormous influence on modern letters had never occurred! As if, for instance, Apollinaire (absent from this honor list) had not inspired a whole era of European poetry!

And there's something still more astonishing: the absence from the list of Beckett and Ionesco. How many dramatists of the past century have had such power, such influence? One? Two? No more than that. Here's a recollection: the emancipation of cultural life in Communist Czechoslovakia was bound up with the little theatres that were born at the very start of the sixties. It was there that I first saw a performance of Ionesco, and it was unforgettable: the explosion of an imagination, the irruption of a disrespectful spirit. I've often said that the Prague Spring began eight years before 1968, with the Ionesco plays that were staged at the little Theatre on the Balustrade.

One might argue that the honor roll I describe is evidence less of provincialism than of the recent intellectual orientation that gives ever less weight to aesthetic criteria—that the people who voted for "Les Misérables" were thinking not of the book's importance in the history of the novel but of its great social resonance in France. Of course, but that only demonstrates how indifference to aesthetic value inevitably shifts the whole culture back into provincialism. France is not merely the land where the French live; it is also a country that other people watch and draw inspiration from. And those are the values (aesthetic, philosophical) by which a foreigner appreciates works born outside his own country. Once again, the rule holds: these values are hard to perceive from the viewpoint of *the small context*, even if it be the prideful small context of a large nation.

THE MAN FROM THE EAST

In the nineteen-sixties I left my country for France, and there I was astonished to discover that I was "an East European exile." Indeed, to the French my country was part of the European Orient. I hastened to explain to all and sundry the real scandal of our situation: stripped of its national sovereignty, Czechoslovakia had been annexed not only by another country but by a whole other *world*, the world of the European East, which, rooted as it is in the ancient past of Byzantium, possesses its own historical problematic, its own architectural look, its own religion (Orthodox), its own alphabet (Cyrillic, derived from Greek writing), and also its own sort of Communism. (No one knows, or ever will know, what Central European Communism would have been without Russia's domination, but in any case it would not have resembled the Communism we did experience.)

Gradually, I understood that I came from a "faraway country" of which "we know nothing." The people around me placed great importance on politics but knew almost nothing about geography: they saw us as having been "Communized," not "taken over." After all, hadn't the Czechs always been part of the same "Slavic world" as the Russians? I explained that while there is a *linguistic* unity among the Slavic nations, there is no Slavic *culture*, no Slavic *world*, and that the history of the Czechs, like that of the Poles, the Slovaks, the Croats, or the Slovenes (and, of course, the Hungarians, who are not at all Slavic), is entirely Western: Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque; close contact with the Germanic world; the struggle of Catholicism against the Reformation. Never anything to do with Russia, which was far off, another world. Only the Poles lived in direct relation with Russia—a relation much like a death struggle.

But my efforts were useless: the "Slavic world" idea persists as an ineradicable commonplace in world historiography. I open a volume of the "Universal History," in the prestigious "Pléiade" series: in the chapter called "The Slavic World," the great Czech theologian Jan Hus is irremediably separated from the Englishman John Wycliffe (whose disciple Hus was) and from the German Martin Luther (who saw Hus as his teacher and precursor). Poor Hus: after being burned at the stake at Constance, now he must suffer through a dreadful eternity in the company of Ivan the Terrible, with whom he would never want to exchange a single word.

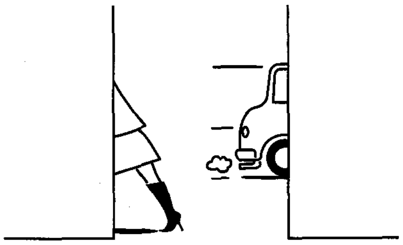
Nothing beats an argument from personal experience. In the late nineteen-seventies, I was sent the manuscript of a foreword written for one of my novels by an eminent Slavic specialist, who placed me in permanent comparison (flattering, of course; at the time, no one meant me harm) with Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Bunin, Pasternak, Mandelstam, and the Russian dissidents. In alarm, I stopped its publication. Not that I felt any antipathy for those great Russians—on the contrary, I admired them all—but in their company I became a different person. I still recall the strange anguish the piece stirred in me: that displacement into a context that was not mine felt like a deportation.

CENTRAL EUROPE

Between *the large context* of the world and *the small context* of the nation, a middle step might be imagined: say, a *median context*. Between Sweden and the world, that step is Scandinavia. For Colombia, it is Latin America. And for Hungary, for Poland? After emigrating, I tried to work out a response to that question, and the title of a piece I wrote at the time sums it up: "A Kidnapped West, or the Tragedy of Central Europe."

Central Europe: What is it? The whole collection of small nations between two powers, Russia and Germany. The easternmost edge of the West. All right, but which nations do we mean? Does it include the three Baltic countries? And what about Romania, tugged toward the East by the Orthodox Church, toward the West by its Romance language? Or Austria, which for a long while represented the political center of that ensemble? Austrian writers are studied exclusively in the context of Germany, and would not be pleased (nor would I be, if I were one of them) to find themselves returned to that multilingual hodgepodge that is Central Europe. And, anyhow, have all those nations shown any clear and enduring wish to form a common grouping? Not at all. For a few centuries, most of them did belong to a large state, the Hapsburg Empire, which in the end they wished only to flee.

All these comments relativize the import of the Central Europe notion, demonstrate its vague and approximate nature, but at the same time clarify it. Is it true that the borders of Central Europe are impossible to trace in any exact, lasting way? It is indeed! Those nations have never been masters of either their own destinies or their borders. They have rarely been the subjects of history but almost always its objects. Their unity was *unintentional*. They were kin to one another not through will, not through fellow-feeling or linguistic proximity, but by reason of similar experience, of common historical situations that brought them together, at different times, in different configurations, and within shifting, never definitive borders.



Central Europe cannot be reduced to "Mitteleuropa" (I never use the term), as it is called, even in non-Germanic tongues, by people who know it only through the window of Vienna; it is *polycentric*, and looks different seen from Warsaw, from Budapest, or from Zagreb. But from whatever perspective one looks at it a common history emerges: through the Czech window I see, in the mid-fourteenth century, the first Central European university, in Prague; in the fifteenth century I see the Hussite revolution foreshadowing the Reformation; in the seventeenth century I see the Hapsburg Empire gradually constructing itself out of Bohemia, Hungary, Austria; I see the wars that, over two centuries, would defend the West against the Turkish invasion; I see the Counter-Reformation, with the flowering of Baroque art that would stamp an architectural unity on the whole of that vast territory, right up to the Baltic countries.

The nineteenth century triggered patriotism in all those peoples who refused to let themselves be assimilated; that is to say, Germanized. Even the Austrians, despite their dominant position within the empire, could not avoid having to choose between their Austrian identity and membership in the great German entity in which they would be dissolved. And how can we not mention Zionism, also born in Central Europe of that same refusal to assimilate, that same desire of a people—the Jews—to live as a nation with their own language? One of Europe's fundamental problems, the problem of the small nations, is nowhere else manifested in so revelatory, so focussed, and so exemplary a way.

In the twentieth century, after the First World War, several independent states rose from the ruins of the Hapsburg Empire, and thirty years later all of them but

Austria found themselves under Russian domination: a situation utterly unprecedented in all of Central European history! There followed a long period of anti-Soviet revolts: in Poland, in bloodied Hungary, then in Czechoslovakia, and again in Poland, at length and powerfully. To my mind, there is nothing more admirable in the Europe of the second half of the twentieth century than that golden chain of revolts, which, over forty years, eroded the empire of the East, made it ungovernable, and tolled the death knell of its reign.

"I do have a fantasy about horse-whipping you, but it's not a sex fantasy."

• •

THE CONTRASTING PATHS OF THE MODERNIST REVOLT

I don't believe that universities will ever teach the history of Central Europe as a separate discipline; in the dormitory of the hereafter, Jan Hus will always be breathing the same Slavic exhalations as Ivan the Terrible. In fact, would I myself ever have made use of the notion of Central Europe, and so tenaciously, if I had not been rocked by the political drama of my native land? Surely not. There are words drowsing in the mist that, at the right moment, rush to our aid. Merely by being defined, the concept of Central Europe unmasked the lie of Yalta, that deal-making among the three victors of the war, who shifted the age-old boundary between the European East and West several hundred kilometres over to the west.

The notion of Central Europe came to my aid on another occasion, too, this time for reasons having nothing to do with politics; it happened when I began to marvel at the fact that the terms "novel," "modern art," and "modern novel" meant something other for me than for my French friends. It was not a disagreement; it was, quite modestly, the recognition of a difference between the two traditions that had shaped us. Our two cultures rose up before me, in a rapid historical panorama, as nearly symmetrical antitheses. In France: classicism, rationalism, the libertine spirit, and then, in the nineteenth century, the era of the great novel. In Central Europe: the reign of an especially ecstatic strain of Baroque art and then, in the nineteenth century, the moralizing idyllicism of Biedermeier, the great Romantic poetry, and very few great novels. Central Europe's matchless strength lay in its music, which, from Haydn to Schoenberg, from Liszt to Bartók, over the course of two centuries embraced in itself all the essential trends in European music; Central Europe staggered beneath the glory of its music.

What was "modern art," that intriguing storm of the first third of the twentieth century? A radical revolt against the aesthetic of the past; that is obvious, of course, except that the pasts were not alike. In France, modern art—anti-rationalist, anti-classicist, anti-realist, anti-naturalist—extended the great lyrical rebellion of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. It found its privileged expression in painting and, above all, in poetry, which was its chosen art. The novel, by contrast, was anathematized (most notably by the Surrealists); it was considered outmoded, forever sealed in its conventional form. In Central Europe, the situation was different: opposition to the ecstatic, romantic, sentimental musical tradition led the modernism of a few geniuses, the most original ones, toward the art that is the privileged sphere of analysis, lucidity, irony; that is, toward the novel.

MY GREAT PLEIADES

In Robert Musil's "The Man Without Qualities" (1930-43), Clarisse and Walter play four-hand piano, "unloosed like two locomotives hurtling along side by side." "Seated on their small stools, they were irritated, amorous, or sad about nothing, or perhaps each of them about something separate," and only "the authority of the music joined them together. . . . There was between them a fusion of the kind that occurs in great public panics, where hundreds of people who an instant earlier differed in every way make the same motions, utter the same mindless cries, gape wide their eyes and mouths." They took "those turbulent seethings, those emotional surges from the innermost being—that is to say, that vague turmoil of the soul's bodily understructures—to be the language of the eternal by which all men can be united."

This ironic comment is aimed not only at music; it goes deeper, to music's *lyrical essence*, to that bewitchment which feeds festivals and massacres alike and turns individuals into ecstatic mobs. Musil's exasperation with the lyrical reminds me of Kafka, who, in his novels, abhors any emotional gesticulation (this sets him radically apart from the German Expressionists) and who, as he said himself, wrote "Amerika" in opposition to "style overflowing with feeling"; Kafka thereby reminds me of Broch, who was allergic to "the spirit of opera," especially to the opera of Wagner (that Wagner so adored by Baudelaire, by Proust), which he called the very model of kitsch (a "genius kitsch," he said); and Broch thereby reminds me of Gombrowicz, who, in his famous text "Against Poets," is reacting both to the deep-rooted Romanticism of Polish literature and to the view of poetry as the untouchable goddess of Western modernism.

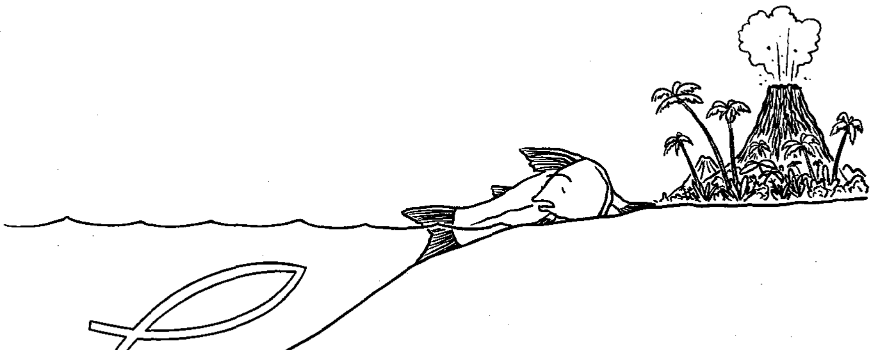
Kafka, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz . . . Did they make up a group, a school, a movement? No; they were all solitaries. I have often called them "the Pleiades of Central Europe's great novelists," and, indeed, like the stars in the constellation, each of them was surrounded by empty space, each of them distant from the others. It seemed all the more remarkable that their work should express a similar aesthetic orientation: they were all *poets* of the novel, which is to say, people impassioned by the form and by its newness; concerned for the intensity of each word, each phrase; seduced by the imagination seeking to move beyond the borders of "realism" but at the same time impervious to seduction by *the lyrical;* hostile to the transformation of the novel into personal confession; allergic to the ornamentalization of prose; entirely focussed on the real world. They, all of them, conceived the novel to be a great *antilyrical poetry.*

KITSCH AND VULGARITY

The word "kitsch" was born in Munich in the mid-nineteenth century; it describes the syrupy dregs of the great Romantic period. But Broch, who saw the connection between Romanticism and kitsch as one of inverse proportions, may have come closer to the truth: according to him, kitsch was the dominant style of the nineteenth century (in Germany and in Central Europe), with a few great Romantic works standing out from it as phenomena of exception. People who experienced the secular tyranny of kitsch (an opera-tenor kind of tyranny) felt particular irritation at the rosy veil thrown over reality, at the immodest exhibition of hearts forever deeply moved, at the "bread drenched in perfume" that Musil speaks of. Kitsch long ago became a very precise concept in Central Europe, where it represents *the supreme aesthetic evil.*

I do not suspect the French modernists of having succumbed to the lure of sentimentality and pomp; but, without a long exposure to kitsch, they had not had occasion to develop a hypersensitive aversion to it. Only in 1960, thus a hundred years after it had appeared in Germany, was the word "kitsch" first used in France; yet the French translators of Broch's essays, in 1966, and of Hannah Arendt, in 1972, both still avoided the term and instead used the translation "*art de pacotille*" (cheap art), thereby rendering incomprehensible their authors' thinking.

Rereading Stendhal's "Lucien Leuwen," with its fashionable drawing-room conversations, I pause over the key words that capture the various attitudes of the participants: *vanité, vulgaire, esprit* (wit—"that vitriolic acid eating at everything"), *ridicule, politesse* ("infinite manners, no feeling"), *bien-pensant* (right thinking). And I ask myself, What is the French word that expresses the worst *aesthetic reprobation* the way the notion of kitsch expresses it for me? It finally comes to me: it is the word *vulgaire, vulgarité.* "M. Du Poirier was a creature of the utmost vulgarity, a man who seemed proud of his crass, overfamiliar ways; thus does a pig wallow in mud with a kind of voluptuous pleasure that is insolent toward the spectator."



"I guess this is where we part ways."

Scorn for the vulgar inhabited the drawing rooms of Stendhal's time just as it does today's. To recall its etymology: "vulgar" comes from *vulgus,* "people"; "vulgar" is what pleases the people. A democrat, a man of the left, a battler for human rights, is obliged to love the people, but he is free to disdain it haughtily for what he finds vulgar.

After Sartre had cast political anathema upon Camus, and after the Nobel Prize had brought jealousy and hatred down on him, Camus felt very uncomfortable among the Paris intellectuals. I am told that he was further distressed by the label of "vulgarity" that was attached to him personally: his lowly origins, his illiterate mother; his situation as a *pied noir* (a Frenchman from Algeria) sympathetic to other *pieds noirs*—people so "overfamiliar" (so "crass"); the lightweight philosophy of his essays; and so on. Reading the articles in which such lynching occurred, I note this passage: Camus is "a peasant dressed up in his Sunday best, . . . a man of the people with his gloves in his hand and his hat still on his head, stepping for the first time into the drawing room. The other guests turn away, they know whom they are dealing with." The metaphor is eloquent. Not only did Camus not know what he was supposed to think (he disparaged progress and sympathized with the Algerian French) but, graver yet, he behaved awkwardly in the drawing room (in the actual or figurative sense): he was vulgar.

In France there is no harsher aesthetic reprobation than this. Reprobation that is sometimes justified but that sometimes also strikes at the best: At Rabelais. And at Flaubert. "The primary characteristic of 'Sentimental Education,'" the famous writer Barbey d'Aurevilly said, on its publication, "is vulgarity, first and foremost. . . . In our view, the world already has enough vulgar folk, vulgar minds, vulgar things, without further adding to the overwhelming number of these disgusting vulgarities."

I recall the early weeks of my emigration. As Stalinism had already been unanimously condemned, people readily understood the tragedy the Russian occupation meant for my country, and they saw me as wrapped in an aura of respectable sadness. I remember sitting at a bar with a Parisian intellectual who had given me much support and help. It was our first meeting in Paris, and I could see grand words hovering in the air above us: persecution, gulag, freedom, banishment from the homeland, courage, resistance, totalitarianism, police terror. Eager to drive off the kitsch of those solemn spectres, I started describing how the fact of being followed, of having police microphones in our apartments, had taught us the delectable art of the hoax. A friend and I had switched apartments, and names as well; he, a big womanizer who was regally indifferent to the microphones, had pulled off some of his finest exploits in my studio. Given that the trickiest moment in any amorous adventure is the breakup, my emigration worked out perfectly for him: one fine day the girls and the ladies arrived to find the apartment locked and my name gone from the door, while I was sending off little farewell cards from Paris, with my own signature, to seven women I had never seen.

I'd meant to amuse this man, who was dear to me, but his face gradually darkened until finally he said, with the sound of the guillotine blade dropping, "I don't find that funny."

We remained friendly, but we were never friends. The memory of our first encounter serves as a key to understanding our long-unacknowledged difference. What held us apart was the clash of two aesthetic attitudes: the man allergic to kitsch collides with the man allergic to vulgarity.

ANTIMODERN MODERNISM

"One must be absolutely modern," Arthur Rimbaud wrote. Some sixty years later, Gombrowicz was not so sure. In "Ferdydurke," the Youngblood family is dominated by the daughter, a "modern high-school girl." She is mad for the telephone; she disdains the classical authors; when a gentleman comes to call she "merely looks at him and, sticking a small wrench between her teeth with her right hand, offers him her left with total nonchalance."

Her mother is modern, too: she works with a "Committee for the Protection of Newborns," is active against the death penalty and for civil liberties; "ostentatiously offhand, she sets out for the toilet" and emerges from it "prouder than she went in"; as she grows older, modernity becomes the more indispensable to her as the sole "substitute for youth."

And Papa? He, too, is modern; he thinks nothing but does everything to please his daughter and his wife.

In "Ferdydurke," Gombrowicz got at the fundamental shift that occurred during the twentieth century: until then, mankind was divided in two—those who defended the status quo and those who sought to change it. Then History began to accelerate: whereas, in the past, man had lived continuously in the same setting, in a society that changed only very slowly, now the moment arrived when he suddenly began to feel History moving beneath his feet, like a rolling sidewalk; the status quo was in motion! All at once, being comfortable with the status quo was the same thing as being comfortable with History on the move! Which meant that a person could be both progressive and conformist, conservative and a rebel, at the same time!

When Camus was attacked as a reactionary by Sartre and his bunch, he got off the famous remark about people who had "merely set down their armchair in the direction of History"; Camus was right, but he did not know that the precious chair was on wheels, and that for some time already everyone had been pushing it forward—the modern high-school girls, their mamas and their papas, as well as all the activists against the death penalty and all the members of the Committee for the Protection of Newborns and, of course, all the politicians, who, as they pushed the chair along, kept their laughing faces turned to the public running along behind them and also laughing, knowing very well that only a person who *delights* in being modern is genuinely modern.

It was then that a certain number of Rimbaud's heirs grasped this extraordinary thing: today, the only modernism worthy of the name is antimodern modernism. ♦

(*Translated, from the French, by Linda Asher.*)

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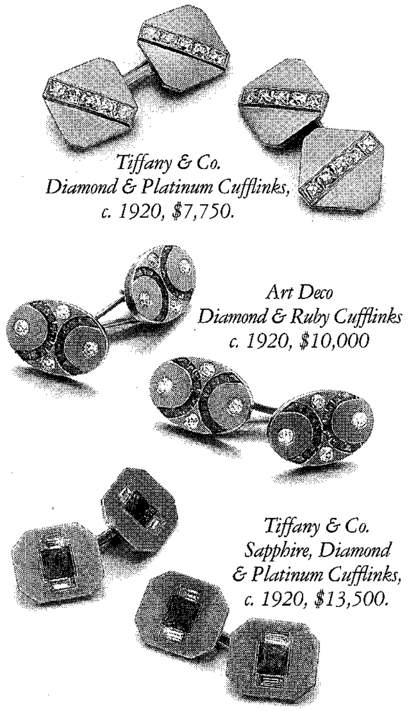

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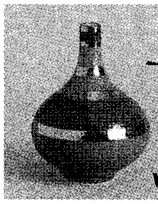
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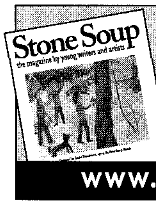
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SHOUTS & MURMURS

HOW TO OPERATE THE SHOWER CURTAIN

BY IAN FRAZIER

Dear Guest: The shower curtain in this bathroom has been purchased with care at a reputable "big box" store in order to provide maximum convenience in showering. After you have read these instructions, you will find with a little practice that our shower curtain is as easy to use as the one you have at home.

You'll note that the shower curtain consists of several parts. The top hem, closest to the ceiling, contains a series of regularly spaced holes designed for the insertion of shower-curtain rings. As this part receives much of the everyday strain of usage, it must be handled correctly. Grasp the shower curtain by its leading edge and gently pull until it is flush with the wall. Step into the tub, if you have not already done so. Then take the other edge of shower curtain and cautiously pull it in opposite direction until it, too, adjoins the wall. A little moisture between shower curtain and wall tiles will help curtain to stick.

Keep in mind that normal bathing will cause you unavoidably to bump against shower curtain, which may cling to you for a moment owing to the natural adhesiveness of water. Some guests find the sensation of wet plastic on their naked flesh upsetting, and overreact to it. Instead, pinch the shower curtain between your thumb and forefinger near where it is adhering to you and simply move away from it until it is disengaged. Then, with the ends of your fingers, push it back to where it is supposed to be.

If shower curtain reattaches itself to you, repeat process above. Under certain atmospheric conditions, a convection effect creates air currents outside shower curtain which will press it against you on all sides no matter what you do. If this happens, stand directly under showerhead until bathroom microclimate stabilizes.

Many guests are surprised to learn that all water pipes in our system run off a single riser. This means that the opening of any hot or cold tap, or the flushing of a toilet, interrupts flow to shower. If you find water becoming extremely hot (or cold), exit tub promptly while using a sweeping motion with one arm to push shower curtain aside.

REMEMBER TO KEEP SHOWER CURTAIN *INSIDE* TUB AT ALL TIMES! Failure to do this may result in baseboard rot, wallpaper mildew, destruction of living-room ceiling below, and possible dripping onto catered refreshments at social event in your honor that you are about to attend. So be careful!

This shower curtain comes equipped with small magnets in the shape of disks which have been sewn into the bottom hem at intervals. These serve no purpose whatsoever and may be ignored. Please do not tamper with them. The vertical lines, or pleats, which you may have wondered about, are there for a simple reason: user safety. If you have to move from the tub fast, as outlined above, the easy accordion-type folding motion of the pleats makes that possible. The gray substance in some of the inner pleat folds is a kind of insignificant mildew, less toxic than what is found on some foreign cheeses.

When detaching shower curtain from clinging to you or when exiting tub during a change in water temperature, bear in mind that there are seventeen mostly empty plastic bottles of shampoo on tub edge next to wall. These bottles have accumulated in this area over time. Many have been set upside down in order to concentrate the last amounts of fluid in their cap mechanisms, and are balanced lightly. Inadvertent contact with a thigh or knee can cause all the bottles to be knocked over and to tumble into the tub or behind it. If this should somehow happen, we ask that you kindly pick the bottles up and put them back in the same order in which you found them. Thank you.

While picking up the bottles, a guest occasionally will lose his or her balance temporarily, and, in even rarer cases, fall. If you find this occurring, remember that panic is the enemy here. Let your body go limp, while reminding yourself that the shower curtain is not designed to bear your weight. Grabbing onto it will only complicate the situation.

If, in a "worst case" scenario, you do take hold of the shower curtain, and the curtain rings tear through the holes in the upper hem as you were warned they might, remain motionless and relaxed in the position in which you come to rest. If subsequently you hear a knock on the bathroom door, respond to any questions by saying either "Fine" or "No, I'm fine." When the questioner goes away, stand up, turn off shower, and lay shower curtain flat on floor and up against tub so you can see the extent of the damage. With a sharp object—a nail file, a pen, or your teeth—make new holes in top hem next to the ones that tore through.

Now lift shower curtain with both hands and reattach it to shower-curtain rings by unclipping, inserting, and reclipping them. If during this process the shower curtain slides down and again goes onto you, reach behind you to shelf under medicine cabinet, take nail file or curved fingernail scissors, and perform short, brisk slashing jabs on shower curtain to cut it back. It can always be repaired later with safety pins or adhesive tape from your toiletries kit.

At this point, you may prefer to get the shower curtain out of your way entirely by gathering it up with both arms and ripping it down with a sharp yank. Now place it in the waste receptacle next to the john. In order that anyone who might be overhearing you will know that you are still all right, sing "Fat Bottomed Girls," by Queen, as loudly as necessary. While waiting for tub to fill, wedge shower curtain into waste receptacle more firmly by treading it underfoot with a regular high-knee action as if marching in place.

We are happy to have you as our guest. There are many choices you could have made, but you are here, and we appreciate that. Operating the shower curtain is kind of tricky. Nobody is denying that. If you do not wish to deal with it, or if you would rather skip the whole subject for reasons you do not care to reveal, we accept your decision. You did not ask to be born. There is no need ever to touch the shower curtain again. If you would like to receive assistance, pound on the door, weep inconsolably, and someone will be along. ♦

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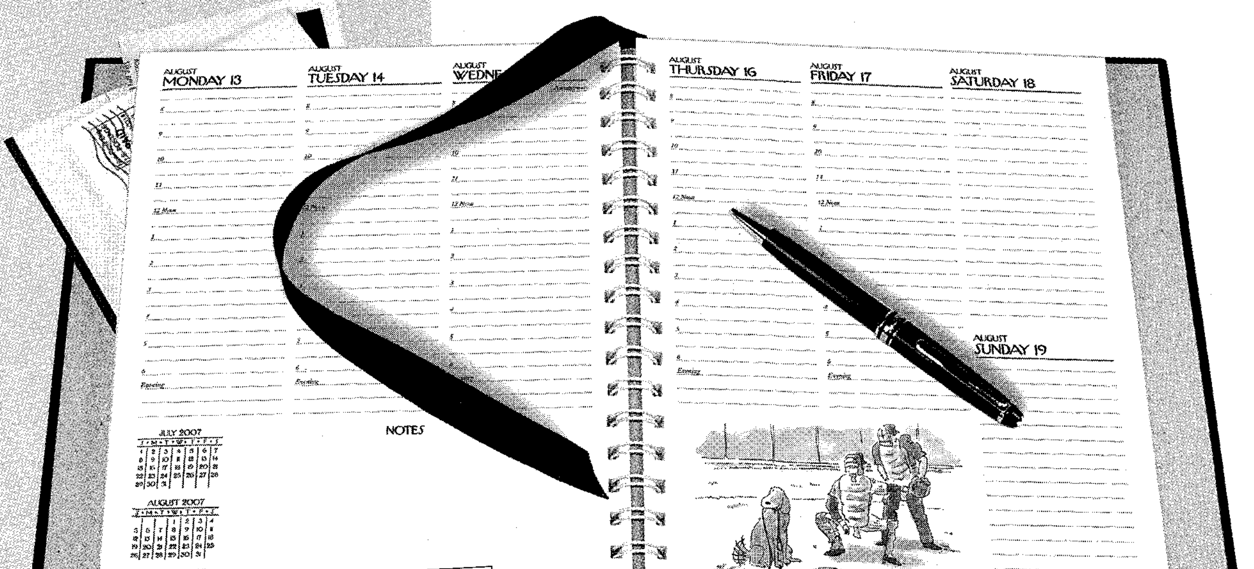
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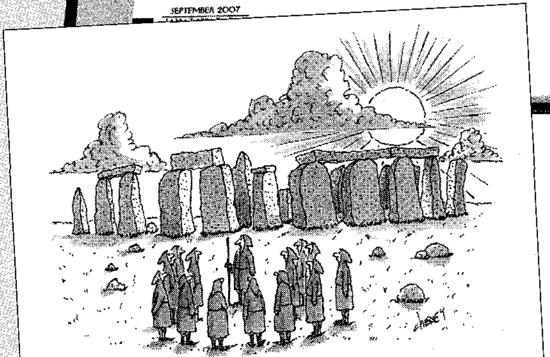

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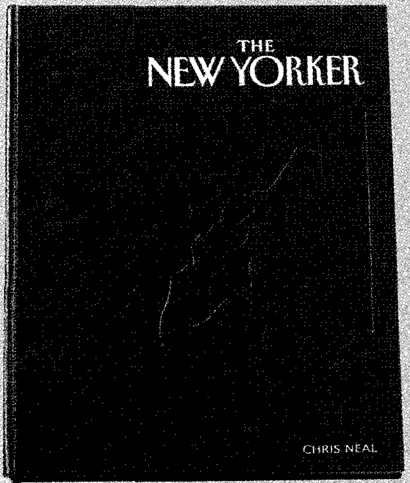
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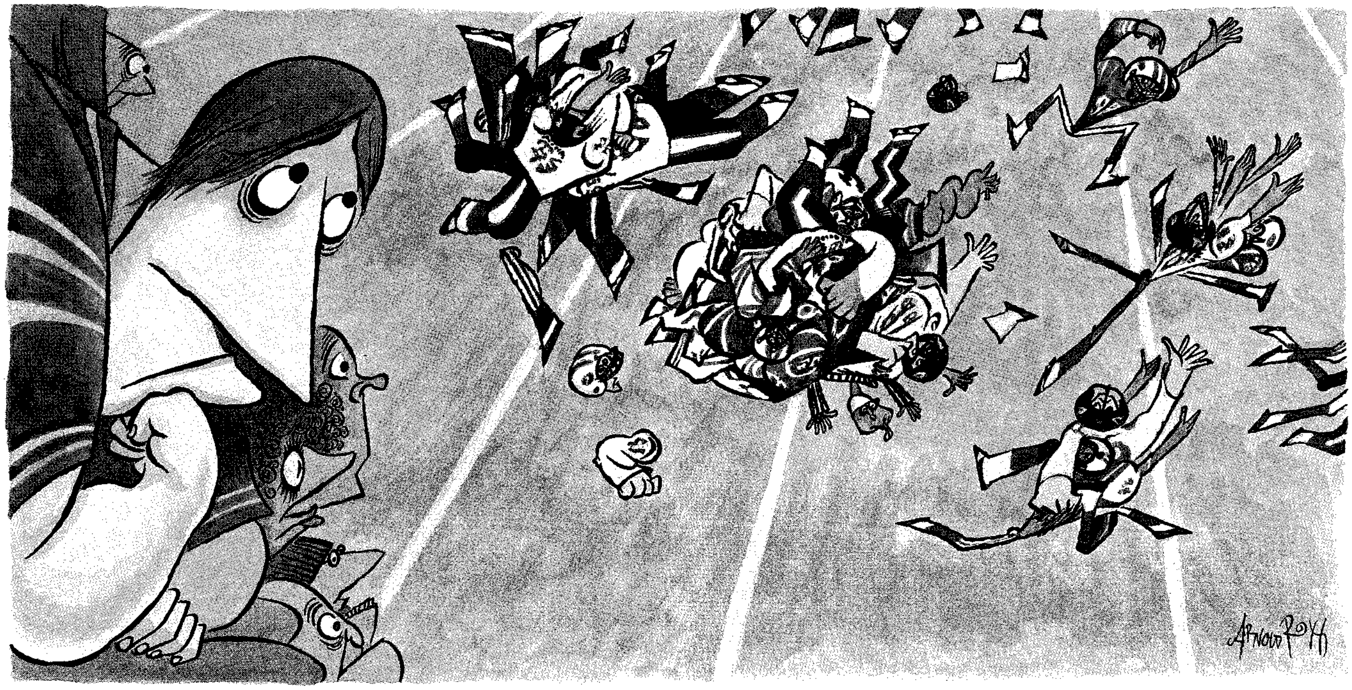
THE SPORTING SCENE

THE UNBEAUTIFUL GAME

What's happening to football?

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Joe Namath is late. Promised for a twelve-thirty press "availability" in the lounge of the press box at Giants Stadium, in East Rutherford, New Jersey—that vital place where the fulcrum of the First Amendment, free food, is celebrated by reporters for hours on end every Sunday morning when the Giants or the Jets are in town—Namath finally wanders into the noiseless, sealed-glass press box around one-fifteen, when the Jets' game against the Houston Texans is already under way. The crowd in the press box has to decide whether to stick with the dullish game or go out and meet the greatest superstar (O.K., the only superstar) this hexed team has ever produced. A small line of reporters hisses out of the press box toward the lounge, like helium leaking from a balloon.



In televised football, a game of pattern and predestination is made to look like a game of agency and individual initiative.

The tiny, intent circle gathers around Namath, who, at sixty-three, has aged into a cartoon version of his younger self. His schnoz, always notable, has become more so; he now looks weirdly like Joe Pepitone, that other, lesser New York swinger of the sixties. His salt-and-pepper hair is swept back, his face, after years in Florida, is leathery, and he wears oversized chestnut-tinted sunglasses, right out of a disco movie. His slouch has become a full question mark of a slump, but his genial, barracuda smile is intact, as are the elaborate schoolboy manners that lead him to refer to the men who mentored him by both their names and their nicknames. "I think that, after my family, Coach Paul 'Bear' Bryant was the biggest influence on me," he says, or, "I think the credit for creating that image"—of the quarterback as playboy—"has to go to Sonny Werblin. I mean, David A. 'Sonny' Werblin."

Joe talks for a bit about his new autobiography, one of two he has published. ("I certainly had help with it, but I wrote most of it myself this time.") But the reporters are looking elsewhere.

"What do you think of Eli?" one asks.

"Well, I think Eli has everything going for him except maybe his facial expressions and the way he carries himself, " Namath jokes. (Eli Manning, the Giants' talented, inconsistent quarterback, has an unfortunate wide-eyed, golly-gee look for all occasions, like Opie, on the old Andy Griffith show, if he were to see Floyd the barber in a Halloween mask.)

"You don't think he has a leadership look?" the reporter says, leaning in eagerly.

"Now, I didn't say that." Namath laughs, seeing the approaching headline clearly and ducking it. "I think he's got all the talent—I just said maybe people misinterpret the way he looks."

I've been a Jets fan for forty years, and it's hard for me to believe this full hand of good fortune. Namath, beyond reason or even the bonds of fandom, got me through some bitter bits of my mixed-up adolescence. I loved him, we all loved him, not just for his famous upset win in Super Bowl III but for his slouch and his white shoes and his quick release—that upper body torquing around to shoot the ball out to George Sauer, Jr., never needing to have the back foot planted—and for the mildly Homeric drama of his career. Crippled early in his football life by bad knees of a kind the surgeons just don't make anymore, he would disappear for half a season, reappear to throw for four hundred

ARNOLD ROTH

yards and four or five touchdowns, and then disappear again into a welter of missed games and interceptions. As with Bobby Orr, his great on-ice contemporary, his fragility was part of his resonance.

Someone asks Namath if he believes that Chad Pennington is in a slump. Pennington, the Jets' current and gallant incumbent, is recovering from two shoulder surgeries and has had a couple of off games. Namath is suddenly intent. "No, he's a good quarterback," he says seriously. "I've only watched him this year as a fan, on television. I haven't had a chance to break down the passing game to see if Chad's going to the right spots or going to the wrong receiver." You sense that the distinction the old quarterback is making—between watching as a fan and actually watching—is, for him, larger than he can quite explain. It isn't just that he hasn't watched as attentively as he might have; watching "as a fan, on television," means that he hasn't really watched at all.

Pennington, it turns out, after everyone has traipsed back to the warm silence of the press box, is breaking out of his slump, courtesy of the slow-footed Houston secondary. Pennington throws—well, not strikes, exactly, but something like special-delivery messages, rising up on his toes to send them spinning nicely, dartlike, into his receivers' arms. The Jets pull out to a twenty-point lead.

Yet, astonishing as that is, what is really astonishing is to be reminded again of how different this game looks depending on where you see it from, on where you're standing (or sitting) while you watch it. When you watch a pro football game from the Crimean War general's viewpoint of the press box, you can see what's going to happen. On television, the quarterback peers out into the distance within the narrowed frame of the midfield camera and for a moment everything seems possible; the viewer can't know if there's a wide-open man fifty yards deep or if there is nothing ahead of Pennington but despair—four men crowding two receivers, who aren't even bothering to wave their arms. The drama of the game on TV lies in finding out.

On the field, the quarterback backpedals, rolls right and takes a look, and what is available—or not—is, within half a second, pitifully evident. If you're watching live, Namath's point comes home; on television you see free will instead of a series of forced choices, mostly bad. The quarterback, the gallant general, peering out, in command, becomes, in reality, a stitch in the pattern already woven, his fate nearly sealed before he gets to fiddle with it. (Which is why coaches always refer to heroic quarterbacks as though they were mere middle-management executives, making "good" and "bad" decisions in the pocket.)

The real excitement of the game on the field lies in the sudden moments of frenzied improvisation, most often by the linebackers and especially by the safeties, who on television mainly appear at the end of the play to make a hit or swipe vainly at a pass. The Jets' safety Kerry Rhodes, for instance, whose excellence is much cited but mostly invisible to one at home in front of the set, becomes the most entertaining player to watch—racing the width of the field to cover an open receiver, running like a man chasing his hat as it blows down the street on a windy day, not running in tandem but running to get there, before it's gone. Now, on a routine pass, Pennington is brought down hard, and writhes on the ground in agony. The entire stadium goes silent. But then he is bouncing up again, ready to go, and pumping his fists to excite the crowd.

After the game, which the Jets hold on to win, 26–11, there is relief in the locker room; Pennington is fine. The players, naked and semi-naked, hold forth on the game, a ritual that we normalize (gotta beat those deadlines) but in which any half-awake anthropologist would spot something significant: the reporters being put in their place by the players' sheer physicality, and the players being put in their place by the reporters' being able to enforce their availability. Pete Kendall, the Jets' left guard, is talking about Pennington's near-miss. "Let's say, he was intently verbalizing," he says, sumo wrestler's body jiggling and eyes ever so slightly alert. "Did I see it? No, I had no idea what was happening. That's good for an offensive lineman. If you can watch what's happening to your quarterback,

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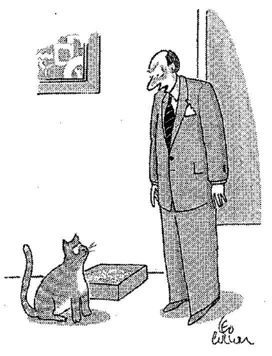
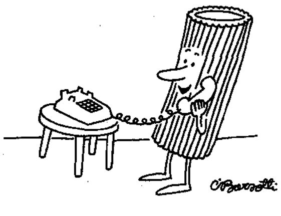


"Never, ever, think outside the box."

Leo Cullum, 1998



"Fusilli, you crazy bastard! How are you?"

Charles Barsotti, 1994

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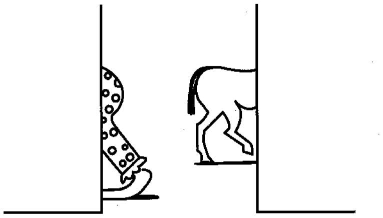
you're not doing your job." He smiles, tightly and pointedly, and goes back to putting on his pants.

All sports change depending on your point of view, but perhaps none change so much as pro football. There is the familiar Sunday-afternoon television—quarterback-centered, replete with instant replays, each play a brief drama of courage and determination, a family entertainment, the original reality television. There is the actual game, seen on the field, where the offensive and defensive lines meet in a pit that is a kind of black hole of heaving, battling bodies—who knows exactly what's going on in there. Rumors of fingers broken and eyes gouged come back, and it is hard not to believe them. (In his new book about football, "The Blind Side," Michael Lewis explains that one of the most famous images in football memory—Lawrence Taylor's wild gesturing for help after breaking Joe Theismann's leg in two places—came about less from L.T.'s unexpected empathy for a stricken colleague than from his fear of getting caught in the pileup himself.) And there is the game as it has been presented, magnificently, by Ed Sabol and his family at N.F.L. Films, all caped Darth Vader-ish heroes, steam rising from mouths in the Green Bay winter; dramatic orchestral music and slow-motion long passes arcing lazily over and over in the midafternoon sky before they come racing to earth in someone's outstretched, praying hands. (A moment that in the stadium would just whiz by, unmusically.)

This makes pro football the original silly putty of the big media, reshaped each year to entice an ever-larger audience—and at the same time sporadically mysterious, alluring, a weird mixture of violence, showman's calculation, and some kind of intense, medieval-tournament-like heraldry (those capes! those helmets! those cheerleaders!) and gallantry. Even when you try to be hard-headed about the game, some bit of color springs out. Alan Yost, a meat-and-potatoes financial journalist who writes most often for the *Wall Street Journal*, points out, in his new book about the finances of the sport, "Tailgating, Sacks and Salary Caps," and with magical correctness, that the success of "Monday Night Football" derived in part from its *lighting:* all those shadowless fields and gleaming helmets. But when you try to be romantic about pro football its reality comes back: the snapping sound of Theismann's fibula, the nearly parodic corporatism that infects the game. The N.F.L. actually employs a special squad of sidelines watchers—"clothes Nazis," the players call them—to be sure that no coach ever strays from wearing officially sanctioned merchandise, right down to the skin, at game time. (Coaches can no longer wear a suit on the sidelines.)

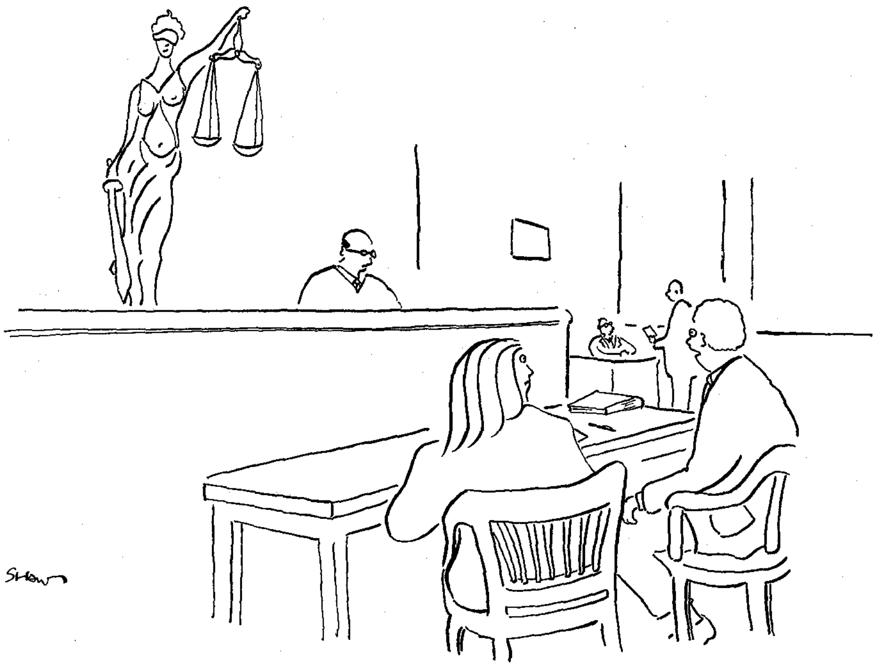
Anything this self-consciously dressed up is asking to be dressed down. And there was a time when pro football, seen from inside the locker room, offered the material for a kind of affable, blue-collar comedy, as an alternative to the nostalgic pieties of baseball and the urban realism that seems to halo basketball. It played the same role that its daddy sport, rugby, still plays throughout the world: the funny, dirty one. George Plimpton's 1966 "Paper Lion" and its even better sequel, "Mad Ducks and Bears," like Dan Jenkins's roughly contemporary novel "Semi-Tough," are not just funny. They are *about* being funny, about the N.F.L. as a place where one is able to be funny. It's the laughter and the conversation, Plimpton explains to a baffled friend at one point about his love for the company of pro football players.

There's no laughter now. John Feinstein's new book on Brian Billick and the Baltimore Ravens, "Next Man Up: A Year Behind the Lines in Today's NFL," employs the same premise as the best of all books about pro football, Roy Blount, Jr.,'s "About Three Bricks Shy of a Load," an account of the 1973 season of the young Pittsburgh Steelers, the year after the Immaculate Reception game but before they won a Super Bowl. Feinstein takes the Ravens and their 2004 season as his subject, and the cast of characters is remarkably similar. There's an oppressed proletariat of special-teams players, a hard-pressed and overpaid first-round-draft-pick quarterback (Terry Bradshaw in Blount, Kyle Boller in Feinstein), a bunch of struggling linemen, and a tight-lipped, humorless, defensive-minded coach (Chuck Noll for the Steelers).



Blount's account of a year within an N.F.L. team thirty years ago was essentially festive and high-spirited; Feinstein's is unrelievedly gloomy, tense, and depressing. "Next Man Up" refers to the cavalier cry of the coaches when yet another player goes down with a severe injury, and his tales are all of players belittled, bruised, and generally beleaguered, hoping to hang on long enough—five years is the run-up time to free agency these days—for a major payday. (And the paydays are major; twenty-five- and forty-million-dollar contracts come and go in his pages.) In part, of course, this difference in tone reflects a difference in taste. Blount saw what he wanted to see and didn't see what he didn't want to see; there are no prizes on Parnassus for fair play. By his own account, he missed the fact that "Jefferson Street" Joe Gilliam, the Steelers' third-string quarterback, was not a free spirit but a heroin addict, and that the Steelers, at least by retrospective legend, were pioneers in steroid abuse. Feinstein, on the other hand, sees what a diligent, intelligent, yet mainly humorless reporter is likely to see: a tangle of ambitions, injuries, and extremely short career expectancies, interrupted by sudden onsets of very big money. The closest thing to a hero in Feinstein's book is the offensive coördinator, Matt Cavanaugh, who, we know from almost the first page, is going to be fired at the end of the season for failing to do enough for the Ravens' offense, not that there is much he could have done. Cavanaugh is a sympathetic and unostentatious man, and, knowing his fate as we do, we wince with Feinstein every time this decent guy comes onstage to get kicked around one more time by the radio talk-show hosts and the owner and the other coaches.

It doesn't sound like fun, you figure out in the end, because it isn't fun. Where it seemed natural for Blount to identify with the players, and be warily sympathetic to the coach, Feinstein identifies with the owner and the coaches and is warily sympathetic to the players. He empathizes with them sufficiently to defend, at length, the linebacker Ray Lewis from the charge of murder, during a melee in Atlanta after the 2000 Super-



"I like to think that justice not only is blind but also has pouty lips."

bowl, when in fact he was no more than a reluctant witness, but it's obvious that the culture of the players is alien to him, as it would be to most outsiders. The atmosphere is closed, guarded, and immensely knowing about the media; the artless charm with which Bradshaw or Dwight White confided in Blount would just not be possible now. With the best will in the world, there is very little you can squeeze out of the players that has not been pasteurized first by the agents and the league and the players' entourage, and by the players' understanding, essentially true, that the reporter is on nobody's side but his own. "Hang-around time," the old journalists' and sportswriters' favorite, is rarely part of the game now.

It is the owners, curiously, who are more eager to have their struggles and dramas narrated. Feinstein has the obnoxious Redskins' owner, Dan Snyder, drop into the narrative from time to time like Snidely Whiplash, to sneer and roll his mustache, while the Ravens' owner, Steve Bisciotti, who let Feinstein into the locker room, is very nearly made the hero of the book. Though Bisciotti does seem like a more levelheaded man than most N.F.L. owners, at one moment Feinstein relates a ritual and needless bit of humiliation that Bisciotti inflicted on Billick, shortly after he became the sole owner of the team. "You have some bad habits," he says to him. "For example, you always address me as 'young man' when you see me, and my wife as 'young lady.' . . . I'm about to become the owner of this team—*your boss*—and you greet me the same way you greet some kid coming up to you for an autograph. That's disrespectful." The insolence of wealth will creep out, as Dr. Johnson said.

The sour tone of so much of Feinstein's book isn't peculiar to Feinstein. Charles P. Pierce, a Boston sportswriter, who has the tools to pull a Blount, and the desire to do it, too, has written his own yearlong, hang-around account, this one about the Patriots and their star quarterback, Tom Brady—"Moving the Chains: Tom Brady and the Pursuit of Everything"—but his book, though better written, isn't much more fun than Feinstein's, mostly because Pierce has to write around his hero rather than through him. Brady is no Alex Karras. "I always figured that being a little dull was part of being a pro," Johnny Unitas is quoted as saying (in a new biography, "Johnny U.," by the former *Time* sportswriter Tom Callahan). "Win or lose, I never walked off a professional football field without first thinking of something boring to say." Brady resembles Unitas in this as in so much else. At one point, Pierce actually has to admit, "What Brady said reads more banal than it sounded at the time." The Patriots' coach, Bill Belichick, meanwhile, is so buttoned-up and close-mouthed that he makes both Chuck Noll and Brian Billick sound like Shecky Greene. (Belichick on Brady: "He does a lot of things well. He makes a lot of good plays. He makes a lot of good throws.")

Even books not precisely about the N.F.L. but about the path to getting there have something strained and unhappy in them. In "The Blind Side," Michael Lewis, an expert storyteller, can stop telling stories long enough to make a case for a complicated point in a convincing way, and one of the points he is making here is about the narrowed focus that football demands. His protagonist, a poor black kid named Michael Oher, is discovered to have "ideal" left-tackle potential, and he's taken in by an evangelical family who help nurture him—the story is basically "Gigi" without Louis Jourdan or the songs: "Thank Heaven for Very Big Boys." But where, for this football-loving reader, Lewis's baseball book was enlivening and cheering, his football book—about the making of a behemoth who may or may not get to the N.F.L.—is oddly sad. (The story of Gigi, who probably wouldn't have made starting courtesan, either, is a pretty sad one, too.)

Partly what drains the joy from the inner game of pro football these days is the same as what drains the joy from much of American life: there's a lot of money to be made by a few people, and a lot less for everybody else. The money in pro football comes in two flavors: more than you can imagine and less than you might think. The base pay for players is much higher, of course, than it is in the real world—the minimum for a rookie is almost three hundred thousand dollars—but the disproportion is real, too, and though the players maybe ought to be grateful for having as much as they do, like the rest of us they can't help being resentful for not having as much as they might. For every Chris McAlister, a shut-down cornerback making eight million a year, there is a Mike Solwold, a long snapper who after three seasons in the N.F.L. has already been cut or waived six times by four teams, and who has the bad luck in the Ravens camp to recover from an injury before he gets cut. (If he had still been injured, the Ravens would have had to pay him compensation.)

Feinstein reminds the reader that this here-today, gone-tomorrow rule is part of life in the N.F.L.; there is no, or very little, "guaranteed" money in pro football—the players work, and can be fired, "at will"—and, while a few upper-crust performers get to keep their signing bonus, most players are a snapped knee ligament away from street clothes. (Pierce reports that seventy-eight per cent of N.F.L. players are unemployed, bankrupt, or divorced within two years of leaving the game, and those are the guys who make it.) Billick says grimly, about cutting players, "Whenever I have to make these cuts, I always think about what Clint Eastwood said in 'Unforgiven': 'When you kill a man, you not only are ending his life, you're taking away everything he ever had or is going to have.' " The unhappiness that you feel among the players in all these books is hardly the misery of the oppressed, but it is something more familiar these days, the rancor of the near-miss. Why them and not us? is a radical question. Why the guy at the next locker and not me? a bitter one.

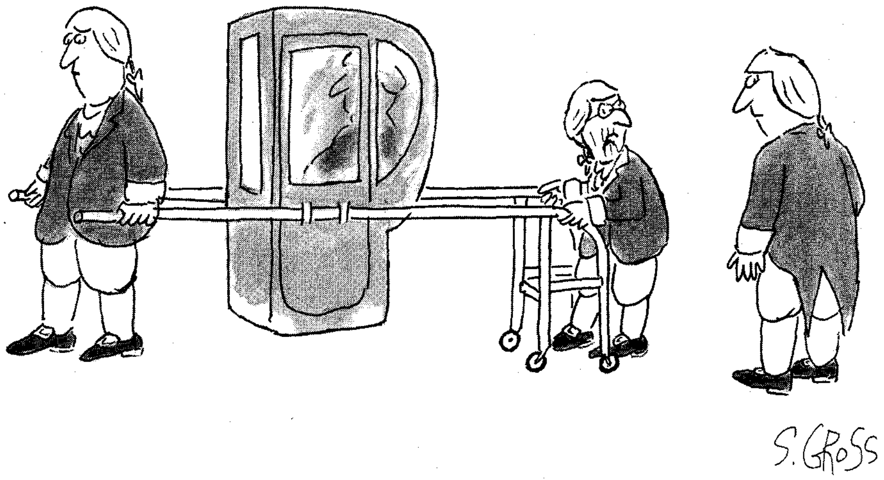
One way of dealing with the difference between the players and their experience—and, occasionally, their income—and everyone else's is to advance into a world of abstract manipulation where the players are best appreciated as lines of numbers or as groupings of pixels. The kids do it through Electronic Arts Sports and its video games, where they make up their own teams and even their own players, and have as much allegiance to the dancing dots as we did to Joe Namath and Matt Snell. The grownups achieve the same effect, deep participation at a precarious distance, by becoming obsessed with the statistical analysis of sports. It is no accident, probably, that, as baseball salaries get bigger, a good deal of baseball writing has become more decorously removed from actual baseball into the numbers world (although Bill James, who started it all, has moved at last into management).

Pro football, however, has traditionally resisted statistical analysis. Again and again, someone, like the fine sportswriter Allen Barra, has tried to match Bill James and write a football abstract, and, again and again, the enterprise has failed. One might think that the betting interest in pro football—which Yost estimates at more than a billion dollars per season—would lead to an ever more avid appetite for numbers, but the kind of analysis that Barra et al. are able to do is, although powerfully suggestive, weakly predictive. Football analysis is trickier than the baseball kind because football really is a team sport: every baseball act is colored by the context in which it takes place—the stadium and the situation—but football acts *are* the context in which they take place. A running back whose team wins every time he runs for a hundred yards is almost certainly busy running out the clock in the second half; he runs for a hundred yards because his team has already won. Unlike in baseball, all eleven guys on the field are involved in every play, and who deserves the credit or blame is harder to know than it looks.

Now, though, intricate analysis seems to have come to pro football, through the good offices of the Internet and its capacity for the micro-niche, and the Web site Footballoutsiders has thrown off a book, the annual "Pro Football Prospectus," which is apparently catching on. Football analysis has triumphed by combining the kind of detached statistical crunching that James pioneered with close amateur breakdowns of Namath's "films." The two things taken together—the actual visual pattern of each play and the numerical representation of it—enable one to escape the contexts and "grade" the individual acts of the ballplayers to get a sense of who is doing what how well on every play.

The point of statistical analysis has never been to crunch numbers but to challenge the conventional wisdom about how teams win and lose, and the football analysts are doing that now. Their conviction (much simplified) is that in the N.F.L. you pass to win and run to sustain a victory—though the average running play nets four yards, the median nets only three—and that most of the more conservative, hardnosed football strategies, like the one-run, bunt-and-sacrifice strategies in baseball, look canny and play dumb. There is even a strong, heretical movement under way against automatically punting on fourth down. (The irony of sophisticated analysis is that, while it tends to run counter to what the shouting heads on television pontificate about, it tends, ultimately, to go along with what the ignorant fans in the stands are screaming for: swing for the fences, go for it on fourth, etc.)

People within the game, though, still talk about brute physical effort, and how much it matters. The two-yard runs, after all, are being played not in a video game but in a real world where the energy and will to get beaten up is a capital sum reduced by expenditure; those two-yard runs expend it. So the closeup view, emphasizing physical domination, isn't necessarily false, though it may be badly argued. The insiders may miss the pattern and still get the point. (Bill James himself has said—half as a joke, but only half—that he thought what brought the Red Sox back in 2004 was "veteran leadership." In the pure world of analysis, veteran leadership was long



"I can't afford to retire."

thought to be an explanatory principle on a par with water sprites and the rotation of the zodiac.)

As our efforts to explain and predict are baffled, we retreat into pure pleasure. Then the question becomes: Enjoy what, how? Fortunately, a new book helps lead us back to becoming the armchair aesthetes we were all along. "In Praise of Athletic Beauty," by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who is a professor of comp lit at Stanford, is the book, and football the central game. Much of the book sounds like the kind of guide to the aesthetic of sports that would be written by someone named Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht; long passages improve by being read in a light German accent. "Looking at empty stadiums," he remarks of his love of Stanford Stadium, "I suspect that stadiums 'stage' or 'make present' what Martin Heidegger once identified as the most elementary philosophical question: why there is something at all, opposed to nothing? On many levels and in multiple settings stadiums materialize, and make us part of, this ultimate ontological contrast."

Nonetheless, Gumbrecht really is a fan, and he is trying to make sense of a fan's experience. Instead of focussing on the easy cases—everybody can admire divers and gymnasts and the lacier kind of ice skaters—he takes for his subject the aesthetic of ballgames, which, he points out, began to become central to Western life as spectator sports only a century ago. His central thesis, to round it out a little crudely, is that we watch sports not out of identification with the players but out of a kind of happy absorption in someone else's ability: "The euphoria of focused intensity seems to go hand in hand with a peculiar quietness. I am at peace with the impression that I cannot control and manipulate the world around me. So intensely quiet do I become and so quietly confident, at least during the seconds when my favorite football team is talking through its next play in the huddle, that I feel I can let go and let come (or not) the things that I desire to come."

In other words, when we watch Joe Namath or Chad Pennington or even Eli complete a pass what we feel isn't pathetic and vicarious but generous and authentic: we give up a bit of ourselves in order to admire another. We're broadened, not narrowed, by our fandom. Our connection with our heroes is through an act of imagination, and the act of imagination, not the connection, is what is worth savoring and saving. (Stephen Dubner, before he struck gold with "Freakonomics," wrote a book about going in search of the Steelers' star runner Franco Harris that made exactly this point; so did Frederick Exley's "A Fan's Notes," for that matter, where the narrator's obsession with Frank Gifford helped him discover himself.)

These sentiments are what our grandfathers would have called noble and manly, and certainly have something to do with what makes us fans, whether the kind who tailgate in the cold or the kind who compile stats in the overheated apartment. But is it possible to divorce, or elevate, our aesthetic and imaginative interest so entirely from our tribal and rooting interest? We can't be aesthetes without also being fans. Even in the press box, many of us aren't really football fans; at least some of the time we're Jets fans or Giants fans or Seahawks fans, and the connection between the team's fate and the fan's fate isn't quite so beautifully disinterested as the formula suggests. My ideal game is not one in which the Jets and the Patriots are engaged in a sterling contest where Pennington and Brady trade coups and the final score is determined in overtime by an inspired play. It's one in which the Jets pull ahead, 35–0, in the first quarter and then coast to victory on a muddy field, as Brady slips and falls. This may be many things, some of them forgivable, but generous and broadening it isn't.

What makes the bald rooting interest forgivable, maybe, is the near-certainty that the ideal game is never, or almost never, going to happen. The essential experience of watching sports is experiencing loss; anyone who has consoled a twelve-year-old after a Jets loss, or been a twelve-year-old in need of consolation, knows this. Since loss and disappointment are the only fixed points in life, maybe the best we can say is that pro football, like anything else we like to watch, gives us a chance to organize those emotions into a pattern, a season, while occasionally giving us the hope of something more. The Jets don't always lose—just nearly always. When they do better, we feel better. That's the margin, or sideline, on which we live. ♦

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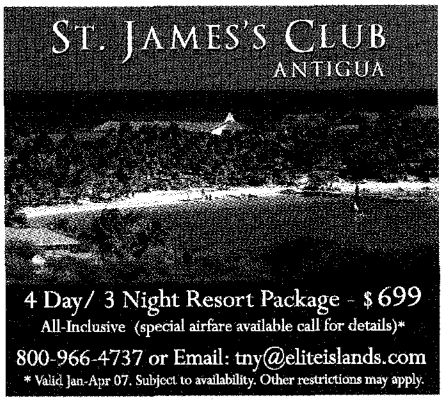

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DEPT. OF PUBLIC POLICY

OPEN SECRETS

Enron, intelligence, and the perils of too much information.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

On the afternoon of October 23, 2006, Jeffrey Skilling sat at a table at the front of a federal courtroom in Houston, Texas. He was wearing a navy-blue suit and a tie. He was fifty-two years old, but looked older. Huddled around him were eight lawyers from his defense team. Outside, television-satellite trucks were parked up and down the block.

"We are here this afternoon," Judge Simeon Lake began, "for sentencing in United States of America versus Jeffrey K. Skilling, Criminal No. H-04-25." He addressed the defendant directly: "Mr. Skilling, you may now make a statement and present any information in mitigation."

Skilling stood up. Enron, the company he had built into an energy-trading leviathan, had collapsed into bankruptcy almost exactly five years before. In May, he had been convicted by a jury of fraud. Under a settlement agreement, almost everything he owned had been turned over to a fund to compensate former shareholders.

He spoke haltingly, stopping in mid-sentence. "In terms of remorse, Your Honor, I can't imagine more remorse," he said. He had "friends who have died, good men." He was innocent—"innocent of every one of these charges." He spoke for two or three minutes and sat down.

Judge Lake called on Anne Beliveaux, who worked as the senior administrative assistant in Enron's tax department for eighteen years. She was one of nine people who had asked to address the sentencing hearing.

"How would you like to be facing living off of sixteen hundred dollars a month, and that is what I'm facing," she said to Skilling. Her retirement savings had been wiped out by the Enron bankruptcy. "And, Mr. Skilling, that only is because of greed, nothing but greed. And you should be ashamed of yourself."

The next witness said that Skilling had destroyed a good company, the third witness that Enron had been undone by the misconduct of its management; another lashed out at Skilling directly. "Mr. Skilling has proven to be a liar, a thief, and a drunk," a woman named Dawn Powers Martin, a twenty-two-year veteran of Enron, told the court. "Mr. Skilling has cheated me and my daughter of our retirement dreams. Now it's his time to be robbed of his freedom to walk the earth as a free man." She turned to Skilling and said, "While you dine on Chateaubriand and champagne, my daughter and I clip grocery coupons and eat leftovers." And on and on it went.

The Judge asked Skilling to rise.

"The evidence established that the defendant repeatedly lied to investors, including Enron's own employees, about various aspects of Enron's business," the Judge said. He had no choice but to be harsh: Skilling would serve two hundred and ninety-two months in prison—twenty-four years. The man who headed a firm that *Fortune* ranked among the "most admired" in the world had received one of the heaviest sentences ever given to a white-collar criminal. He would leave prison an old man, if he left prison at all.

"I only have one request, Your Honor," Daniel Petrocelli, Skilling's lawyer, said. "If he received ten fewer months, which shouldn't make a difference in terms of the goals of sentencing, if you do the math and you subtract fifteen per cent for good time, he then qualifies under Bureau of Prisons policies to be able to serve his time at a lower facility. Just a ten-month reduction in sentence . . ."

It was a plea for leniency. Skilling wasn't a murderer or a rapist. He was a pillar of the Houston community, and a small adjustment in his sentence would keep him from spending the rest of his life among hardened criminals.

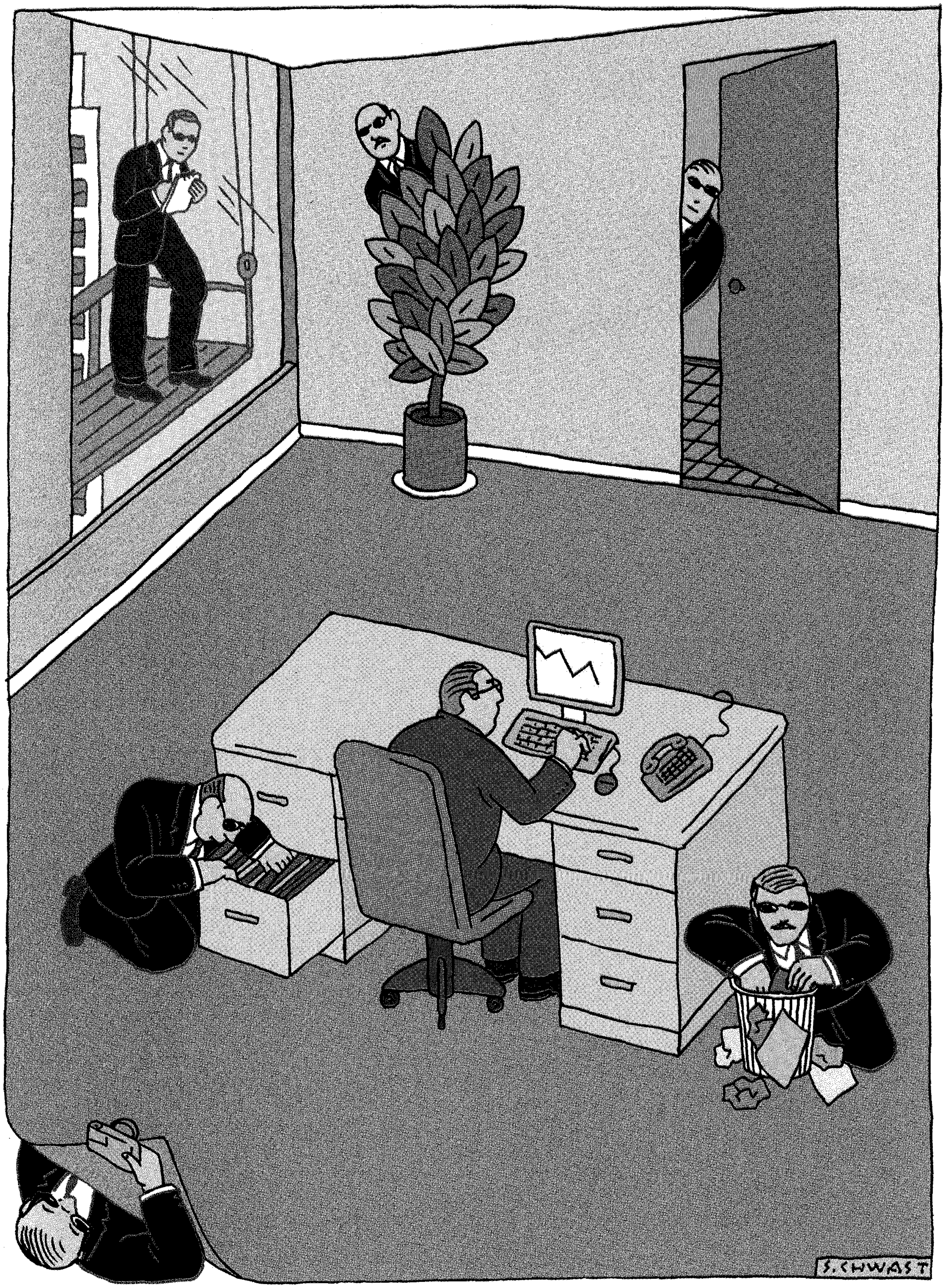
"No," Judge Lake said.

The national-security expert Gregory Treverton has famously made a distinction between puzzles and mysteries. Osama bin Laden's whereabouts are a puzzle. We can't find him because we don't have enough information. The key to the puzzle will probably come from someone close to bin Laden, and until we can find that source bin Laden will remain at large.

The problem of what would happen in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein was, by contrast, a mystery. It wasn't a question that had a simple, factual answer. Mysteries require judgments and the assessment of uncertainty, and the hard part is not that we have too little information but that we have too much. The C.I.A. had a position on what a post-invasion Iraq would look like, and so did the Pentagon and the State Department and Colin Powell and Dick Cheney and any number of political scientists and journalists and think-tank fellows. For that matter, so did every cabdriver in Baghdad.

The distinction is not trivial. If you consider the motivation and methods behind the attacks of September 11th to be mainly a puzzle, for instance, then the logical response is to increase the collection of intelligence, recruit more spies, add to the volume of information we have about Al Qaeda. If you consider September 11th a mystery, though, you'd have to wonder whether adding to the volume of information will only make things worse. You'd want to improve the analysis within the intelligence community; you'd want more thoughtful and skeptical people with the skills to look more closely at what we already know about Al Qaeda. You'd want to send the counterterrorism team from the C.I.A. on a golfing trip twice a month with the

SEYMOUR CHWAST



Was the trouble with Enron that its management didn't tell us enough—or that analysts failed to make sense of the data it supplied?

"I like to keep up with all the latest things I don't care about."

• •

counterterrorism teams from the F.B.I. and the N.S.A. and the Defense Department, so they could get to know one another and compare notes.

If things go wrong with a puzzle, identifying the culprit is easy: it's the person who withheld information. Mysteries, though, are a lot murkier: sometimes the information we've been given is inadequate, and sometimes we aren't very smart about making sense of what we've been given, and sometimes the question itself cannot be answered. Puzzles come to satisfying conclusions. Mysteries often don't.

If you sat through the trial of Jeffrey Skilling, you'd think that the Enron scandal was a puzzle. The company, the prosecution said, conducted shady side deals that no one quite understood. Senior executives withheld critical information from investors. Skilling, the architect of the firm's strategy, was a liar, a thief, and a drunk. *We were not told enough*—the classic puzzle premise—was the central assumption of the Enron prosecution.

"This is a simple case, ladies and gentlemen," the lead prosecutor for the Department of Justice said in his closing arguments to the jury:

> Because it's so simple, I'm probably going to end before my allotted time. It's black-and-white. Truth and lies. The shareholders, ladies and gentlemen, . . . buy a share of stock, and for that they're not entitled to much but they're entitled to the truth. They're entitled for the officers and employees of the company to put their interests ahead of their own. They're entitled to be told what the financial condition of the company is.
>
> They are entitled to honesty, ladies and gentlemen.

But the prosecutor was wrong. Enron wasn't really a puzzle. It was a mystery.

In late July of 2000, Jonathan Weil, a reporter at the Dallas bureau of the *Wall Street Journal*, got a call from someone he knew in the investment-management business. Weil wrote the stock column, called "Heard in Texas," for the paper's regional edition, and he had been closely following the big energy firms based in Houston—Dynegy, El Paso, and Enron. His caller had a suggestion. "He said, 'You really ought to check out Enron and Dynegy and see where their earnings come from,' " Weil recalled. "So I did."

Weil was interested in Enron's use of what is called mark-to-market accounting, which is a technique used by companies that engage in complicated financial trading. Suppose, for instance, that you are an energy company and you enter into a hundred-million-dollar contract with the state of California to deliver a billion kilowatt hours of electricity in 2016. How much is that contract worth? You aren't going to get paid for another ten years, and you aren't going to know until then whether you'll show a profit on the deal or a loss. Nonetheless, that hundred-million-dollar promise clearly matters to your bottom line. If electricity steadily drops in price over the next several years, the contract is going to become a hugely valuable asset. But if electricity starts to get more expensive as 2016 approaches, you could be out tens of millions of dollars. With mark-to-market accounting, you estimate how much revenue the deal is going to bring in and put that number in your books at the moment you sign the contract. If, down the line, the estimate changes, you adjust the balance sheet accordingly.

When a company using mark-to-market accounting says it has made a profit of ten million dollars on revenues of a hundred million, then, it could mean one of two things. The company may actually have a hundred million dollars in its bank accounts, of which ten million will remain after it has paid its bills. Or it may be guessing that it will make ten million dollars on a deal where money may not actually change hands for years. Weil's source wanted him to see how much of the money Enron said it was making was "real."

Weil got copies of the firm's annual reports and quarterly filings and began comparing the income statements and the cash-flow statements. "It took me a while to figure out everything I needed to," Weil said. "It probably took a good month or so. There was a lot of noise in the financial statements, and to zero in on this particular issue you needed to cut through a lot of that." Weil spoke to Thomas Linsmeier, then an accounting professor at Michigan State, and they talked about how some finance companies in the nineteen-nineties had used mark-to-market accounting on subprime loans—that is, loans made to higher-credit-risk consumers—and when the economy declined and consumers defaulted or paid off their loans more quickly than expected, the lenders suddenly realized that their estimates of how much money they were going to make were far too generous. Weil spoke to someone at the Financial Accounting Standards Board, to an analyst at the

Moody's investment-rating agency, and to a dozen or so others. Then he went back to Enron's financial statements. His conclusions were sobering. In the second quarter of 2000, $747 million of the money Enron said it had made was "unrealized"—that is, it was money that executives thought they were going to make at some point in the future. If you took that imaginary money away, Enron had shown a significant loss in the second quarter. This was one of the most admired companies in the United States, a firm that was then valued by the stock market as the seventh-largest corporation in the country, and there was practically no cash coming into its coffers.

Weil's story ran in the *Journal* on September 20, 2000. A few days later, it was read by a Wall Street financier named James Chanos. Chanos is a short-seller—an investor who tries to make money by betting that a company's stock will fall. "It pricked up my ears," Chanos said. "I read the 10-K and the 10-Q that first weekend," he went on, referring to the financial statements that public companies are required to file with federal regulators. "I went through it pretty quickly. I flagged right away the stuff that was questionable. I circled it. That was the first run-through. Then I flagged the pages and read the stuff I didn't understand, and reread it two or three times. I remember I spent a couple hours on it." Enron's profit margins and its return on equity were plunging, Chanos saw. Cash flow—the life blood of any business—had slowed to a trickle, and the company's rate of return was less than its cost of capital: it was as if you had borrowed money from the bank at nine-per-cent interest and invested it in a savings bond that paid you seven-per-cent interest. "They were basically liquidating themselves," Chanos said.

In November of that year, Chanos began shorting Enron stock. Over the next few months, he spread the word that he thought the company was in trouble. He tipped off a reporter for *Fortune*, Bethany McLean. She read the same reports that Chanos and Weil had, and came to the same conclusion. Her story, under the headline "IS ENRON OVERPRICED?," ran in March of 2001. More and more journalists and analysts began taking a closer look at Enron, and the stock began to fall. In August, Skilling resigned. Enron's credit rating was downgraded. Banks became reluctant to lend Enron the money it needed to make its trades. By December, the company had filed for bankruptcy.

Enron's downfall has been documented so extensively that it is easy to overlook how peculiar it was. Compare Enron, for instance, with Watergate, the prototypical scandal of the nineteen-seventies. To expose the White House coverup, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein used a source—Deep Throat—who had access to many secrets, and whose identity had to be concealed. He warned Woodward and Bernstein that their phones might be tapped. When Woodward wanted to meet with Deep Throat, he would move a flower pot with a red flag in it to the back of his apartment balcony. That evening, he would leave by the back stairs, take multiple taxis to make sure he wasn't being followed, and meet his source in an underground parking garage at 2 A.M. Here, from "All the President's Men," is Woodward's climactic encounter with Deep Throat:

> "Okay," he said softly. "This is very serious. You can safely say that fifty people worked for the White House and CRP to play games and spy and sabotage and gather intelligence. Some of it is beyond belief, kicking at the opposition in every imaginable way."
>
> Deep Throat nodded confirmation as Woodward ran down items on a list of tactics that he and Bernstein had heard were used against the political opposition: bugging, following people, false press leaks, fake letters, cancelling campaign rallies, investigating campaign workers' private lives, planting spies, stealing documents, planting provocateurs in political demonstrations.
>
> "It's all in the files," Deep Throat said. "Justice and the Bureau know about it, even though it wasn't followed up."
>
> Woodward was stunned. Fifty people directed by the White House and CRP to destroy the opposition, no holds barred?
>
> Deep Throat nodded.
>
> The White House had been willing to subvert—was that the right word?—the whole electoral process? Had actually gone ahead and tried to do it?
>
> Another nod. Deep Throat looked queasy.
>
> And hired fifty agents to do it?
>
> "You can safely say more than fifty," Deep Throat said. Then he turned, walked up the ramp and out. It was nearly 6:00 a.m.

Watergate was a classic puzzle: Wood-

"Perhaps if I phrased the question differently."

ward and Bernstein were searching for a buried secret, and Deep Throat was their guide.

Did Jonathan Weil have a Deep Throat? Not really. He had a friend in the investment-management business with some suspicions about energy-trading companies like Enron, but the friend wasn't an insider. Nor did Weil's source direct him to files detailing the clandestine activities of the company. He just told Weil to read a series of public documents that had been prepared and distributed by Enron itself. Woodward met with his secret source in an underground parking garage in the hours before dawn. Weil called up an accounting expert at Michigan State.

When Weil had finished his reporting, he called Enron for comment. "They had their chief accounting officer and six or seven people fly up to Dallas," Weil says. They met in a conference room at the *Journal's* offices. The Enron officials acknowledged that the money they said they earned was virtually all money that they *hoped* to earn. Weil and the Enron officials then had a long conversation about how certain Enron was about its estimates of future earnings. "They were telling me how brilliant the people who put together their mathematical models were," Weil says. "These were M.I.T. Ph.D.s. I said, 'Were your mathematical models last year telling you that the California electricity markets would be going berserk this year? No? Why not?' They said, 'Well, this is one of those crazy events.' It was late September, 2000, so I said, 'Who do you think is going to win? Bush or Gore?' They said, 'We don't know.' I said, 'Don't you think it will make a difference to the market whether you have an environmentalist Democrat in the White House or a Texas oil man?" It was all very civil. "There was no dispute about the numbers," Weil went on. "There was only a difference in how you should interpret them."

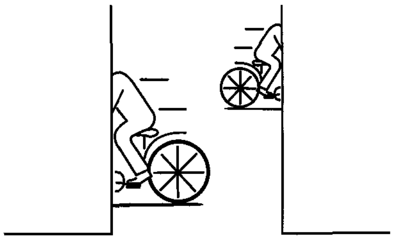
Of all the moments in the Enron unravelling, this meeting is surely the strangest. The prosecutor in the Enron case told the jury to send Jeffrey Skilling to prison because Enron had hidden the truth: You're "entitled to be told what the financial condition of the company is," the prosecutor had said. But what truth was Enron hiding here? Everything Weil learned for his Enron exposé came from Enron, and when he wanted to confirm his numbers the company's executives got on a plane and sat down with him in a conference room in Dallas.

Nixon never went to see Woodward and Bernstein at the Washington *Post*. He hid in the White House.

The second, and perhaps more consequential, problem with Enron's accounting was its heavy reliance on what are called special-purpose entities, or S.P.E.s.

An S.P.E. works something like this. Your company isn't doing well; sales are down and you are heavily in debt. If you go to a bank to borrow a hundred million dollars, it will probably charge you an extremely high interest rate, if it agrees to lend to you at all. But you've got a bundle of oil leases that over the next four or five years are almost certain to bring in a hundred million dollars. So you hand them over to a partnership—the S.P.E.—that you have set up with some outside investors. The bank then lends a hundred million dollars to the partnership, and the partnership gives the money to you. That bit of financial maneuvering makes a big difference. This kind of transaction did not (at the time) have to be reported in the company's balance sheet. So a company could raise capital without increasing its indebtedness. And because the bank is almost certain the leases will generate enough money to pay off the loan, it's willing to lend its money at a much lower interest rate. S.P.E.s have become commonplace in corporate America.

Enron introduced all kinds of twists into the S.P.E. game. It didn't always put blue-chip assets into the partnerships—like oil leases that would reliably generate income. It sometimes sold off less than sterling assets. Nor did it always sell those assets to outsiders, who presumably would raise questions about the value of what they were buying. Enron had its own executives manage these partnerships. And the company would make the deals work—that is, get the partnerships and the banks to play along—by guaranteeing that, if whatever they had to sell declined in value, Enron would make up the difference with its own stock. In other words, Enron didn't sell parts of itself to an outside entity; it effectively sold parts of itself to itself—a strategy that was not only legally questionable but extraordinarily risky. It was Enron's tangle of financial obligations to the S.P.E.s that ended up triggering the collapse.



When the prosecution in the Skilling case argued that the company had misled its investors, they were referring, in part, to these S.P.E.s. Enron's management, the argument went, had an obligation to reveal the extent to which it had staked its financial livelihood on these shadowy side deals. As the Powers Committee, a panel charged with investigating Enron's demise, noted, the company "failed to achieve a fundamental objective: they did not communicate the essence of the transactions in a sufficiently clear fashion to enable a reader of [Enron's] financial statements to understand what was going on." In short, we weren't told enough.

Here again, though, the lessons of the Enron case aren't nearly so straightforward. The public became aware of the nature of these S.P.E.s through the reporting of several of Weil's colleagues at the *Wall Street Journal*—principally John Emshwiller and Rebecca Smith—starting in the late summer of 2001. And how was Emshwiller tipped off to Enron's problems? The same way Jonathan Weil and Jim Chanos were: he read what Enron had reported in its own public filings. Here is the description of Emshwiller's epiphany, as described in Kurt Eichenwald's "Conspiracy of Fools," the definitive history of the Enron debacle. (Note the verb "scrounged," which Eichenwald uses to describe how Emshwiller found the relevant Enron documents. What he means by that is "downloaded.")

> It was section eight, called "Related Party Transactions," that got John Emshwiller's juices flowing.
>
> After being assigned to follow the Skilling resignation, Emshwiller had put in a request for an interview, then scrounged up a copy of Enron's most recent SEC filing in search of any nuggets.

BAGRAM, AFGHANISTAN, 2002

The interrogation celebrated spikes and cuffs,
the inky blue that invades a blackened eye,
the eyeball that bulges like a radish,
that incarnadine only blood can create.
They asked the young taxi driver questions
he could not answer, and they beat his legs
until he could no longer kneel on their command.
They chained him by the wrists to the ceiling.
They may have admired the human form then,
stretched out, for the soldiers were also athletes
trained to shout in unison and be buddies.
By the time his legs had stiffened, a blood clot
was already tracing a vein into his heart.
They said he was dead when they cut him down,
but he was dead the day they arrested him.
Are they feeding the prisoners gravel now?
To make them skillful orators as they confess?
Here stands Demosthenes in the military court,
unable to form the words "my country." What
shall we do, we who are at war but are asked
to pretend we are not? Do we need another
naïve apologist to crown us with clichés
that would turn the grass brown above a grave?
They called the carcass Mr. Dilawar. They
believed he was innocent. Their orders were
to step on the necks of the prisoners, to
break their will, to make them say something
in a sleep-deprived delirium of fractures,
rising to the occasion, or, like Mr. Dilawar,
leaving his few possessions and his body.

—*Marvin Bell*

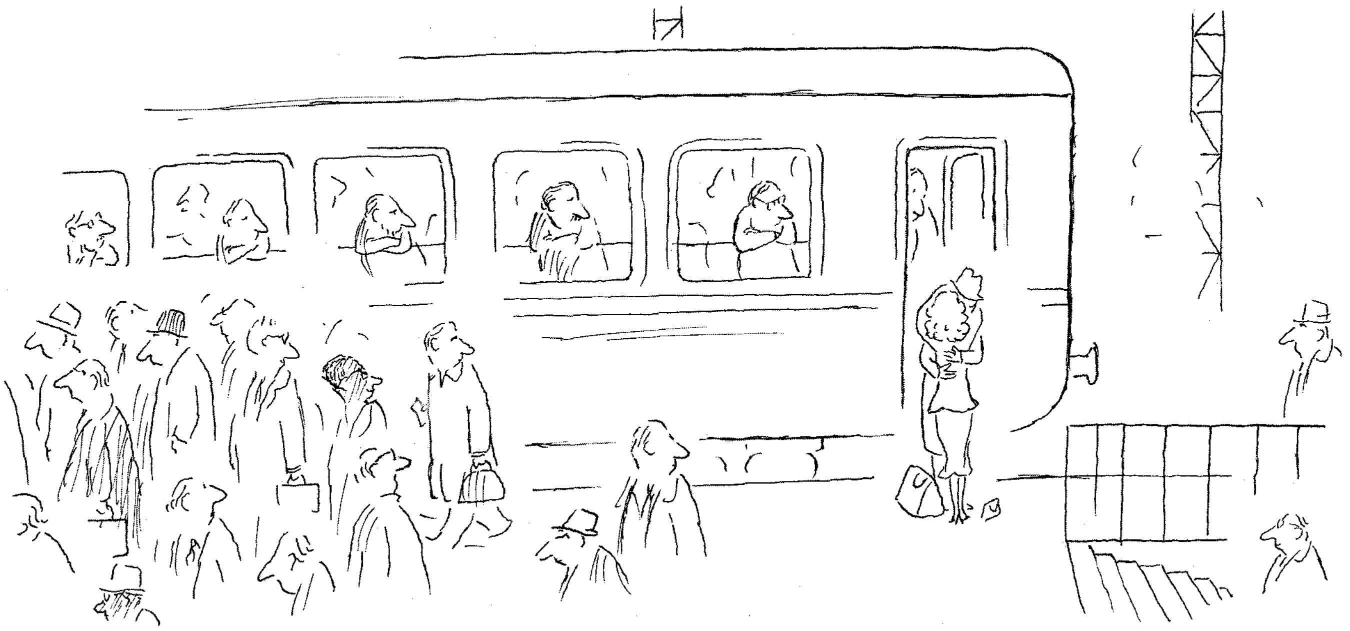
> What he found startled him. Words about some partnerships run by an unidentified "senior officer." Arcane stuff, maybe, but the numbers were huge. Enron reported more than $240 million in revenues in the first six months of the year from its dealings with them.

Enron's S.P.E.s were, by any measure, evidence of extraordinary recklessness and incompetence. But you can't blame Enron for covering up the existence of its side deals. It didn't; it disclosed them. The argument against the company, then, is more accurately that it didn't tell its investors *enough* about its S.P.E.s. But what is enough? Enron had some three thousand S.P.E.s, and the paperwork for each one probably ran in excess of a thousand pages. It scarcely would have helped investors if Enron had made all three million pages public. What about an edited version of each deal? Steven Schwarcz, a professor at Duke Law School, recently examined a random sample of twenty S.P.E. disclosure statements from various corporations—that is, summaries of the deals put together for interested parties—and found that on average they ran to forty single-spaced pages. So a summary of Enron's S.P.E.s would have come to a hundred and twenty thousand single-spaced pages. What about a summary of all those summaries? That's what the bankruptcy examiner in the Enron case put together, and it took up a thousand pages. Well, then, what about a summary of the summary of the summaries? That's what the Powers Committee put together. The committee looked only at the "substance of the most significant transactions," and its accounting still ran to two hundred numbingly complicated pages and, as Schwarcz points out, that was "with the benefit of hindsight and with the assistance of some of the finest legal talent in the nation."

A puzzle grows simpler with the addition of each new piece of information: if I tell you that Osama bin Laden is hiding in Peshawar, I make the problem of finding him an order of magnitude easier, and if I add that he's hiding in a neighborhood in the northwest corner of the city, the problem becomes simpler still. But here the rules seem different. According to the Powers report, many on Enron's board of directors failed to understand "the economic rationale, the consequences, and the risks" of their company's S.P.E. deals—and the directors sat in meetings where those deals were discussed in detail. In "Conspiracy of Fools," Eichenwald convincingly argues that Andrew Fastow, Enron's chief financial officer, didn't understand the full economic implications of the deals, either, and he was the one who put them together.

"These were very, very sophisticated, complex transactions," says Anthony Catanach, who teaches accounting at the Villanova University School of Business and has written extensively on the Enron case. Referring to Enron's accounting firm, he said, "I'm not even sure any of Arthur Andersen's field staff at Enron would have been able to understand them, even if it was all in front of them. This is senior-management-type stuff. I spent *two months* looking at the Powers report, just diagramming it. These deals were really convoluted."

Enron's S.P.E.s, it should be noted, would have been this hard to understand even if they were standard issue. S.P.E.s are by nature difficult. A company creates an S.P.E. because it wants to reassure banks about the risks of making a loan. To provide that reassurance, the company gives its lenders and partners very detailed information about a specific portion of its business. And the more certainty a company creates for the lender—the more guarantees and safeguards and explanations it writes into the deal—the less comprehensible the transaction becomes to outsiders. Schwarcz writes that Enron's disclosure was "necessarily imperfect." You can try to make financial transactions under-



standable by simplifying them, in which case you run the risk of smoothing over some of their potential risks, or you can try to disclose every potential pitfall, in which case you'll make the disclosure so unwieldy that no one will be able to understand it. To Schwarcz, all Enron proves is that in an age of increasing financial complexity the "disclosure paradigm"—the idea that the more a company tells us about its business, the better off we are—has become an anachronism.

During the summer of 1943, Nazi propaganda broadcasts boasted that the German military had developed a devastating "super weapon." Immediately, the Allied intelligence services went to work. Spies confirmed that the Germans had built a secret weapons factory. Aerial photographs taken over northern France showed a strange new concrete installation pointed in the direction of England. The Allies were worried. Bombing missions were sent to try to disrupt the mysterious operation, and plans were drawn up to deal with the prospect of devastating new attacks on English cities. Nobody was sure, though, whether the weapon was real. There seemed to be weapons factories there, but it wasn't evident what was happening inside them. And there was a launching pad in northern France, but it might have been just a decoy, designed to distract the Allies from bombing real targets. The German secret weapon was a puzzle, and the Allies didn't have enough information to solve it. There was another way to think about the problem, though, which ultimately proved far more useful: treat the German secret weapon as a mystery.

The mystery-solvers of the Second World War were small groups of analysts whose job was to listen to the overseas and domestic propaganda broadcasts of Japan and Germany. The British outfit had been around since shortly before the First World War and was run by the BBC. The American operation was known as the Screwball Division, the historian Stephen Mercado writes, and in the early nineteen-forties had been housed in a nondescript office building on K Street, in Washington. The analysts listened to the same speeches that anyone with a shortwave radio could listen to. They simply sat at their desks with headphones on, working their way through hours and hours of Nazi broadcasts. Then they tried to figure out how what the Nazis said publicly—about, for instance, the possibility of a renewed offensive against Russia—revealed what they felt about, say, invading Russia. One journalist at the time described the propaganda analysts as "the greatest collection of individualists, international rolling stones, and slightly batty geniuses ever gathered together in one organization." And they had very definite thoughts about the Nazis' secret weapon.

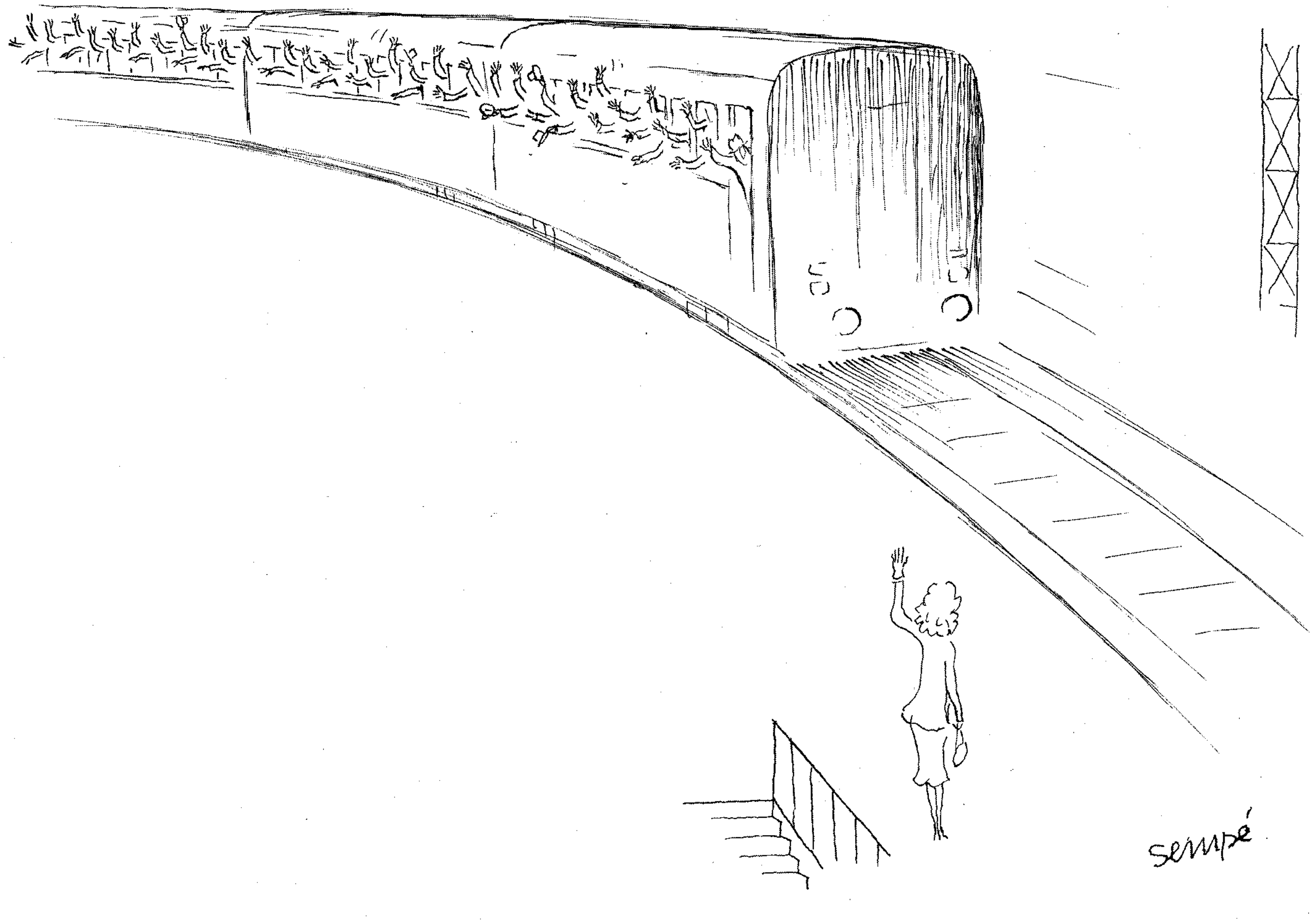
The German leadership, first of all, was boasting about the secret weapon in domestic broadcasts. That was important. Propaganda was supposed to boost morale. If the Nazi leadership said things that turned out to be misleading, its credibility would fall. When German U-boats started running into increasingly effective Allied resistance in the spring of 1943, for example, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, tacitly acknowledged the bad news, switching his emphasis from trumpeting recent victories to predicting long-term success, and blaming the weather for hampering U-boat operations. Up to that point, Goebbels had never lied to his own people about that sort of news. So if he said that Germany had a devastating secret weapon it meant, in all likelihood, that Germany had a devastating secret weapon.

Starting from that premise, the analysts then mined the Nazis' public pronouncements for more insights. It was, they concluded, "beyond reasonable doubt" that as of November, 1943, the weapon existed, that it was of an entirely new type, that it could not be easily countered, that it would produce striking results, and that it would shock the civilian population upon whom it would be used. It was, furthermore, "highly probable" that the Germans were past the experimental stage as of May of 1943, and that something had happened in August of that year that significantly delayed deployment. The analysts based this inference, in part, on the fact that, in August, the Nazis abruptly stopped mentioning their secret weapon for ten days, and that when they started again their threats took on a new, less certain, tone. Finally, it could be tentatively estimated that the weapon would be ready between the middle of January and the middle of April, with a month's margin of error on either side. That inference, in part, came from Nazi propaganda in late 1943, which suddenly became more serious and specific in tone, and it seemed unlikely that Goebbels would raise hopes in this way if he couldn't deliver within a few months. The secret weapon was the Nazis' fabled V-1 rocket, and virtually every one of the propaganda analysts' predictions turned out to be true.

The political scientist Alexander George described the sequence of V-1 rocket inferences in his 1959 book "Propaganda Analysis," and the striking thing about his account is how contemporary it seems. The spies were fighting a nineteenth-century war. The analysts belonged to our age, and the lesson of their triumph is that the complex, uncertain issues that the modern world throws at us require the mystery paradigm.

Diagnosing prostate cancer used to be a puzzle, for example: the doctor would do a rectal exam and feel for a lumpy tumor on the surface of the patient's prostate. These days, though, we don't wait for patients to develop the symptoms of prostate cancer. Doctors now regularly test middle-aged men for elevated levels of PSA, a substance associated with prostate changes, and, if the results look problematic, they use ultrasound imaging to take a picture of the prostate. Then they perform a biopsy, removing tiny slices of the gland and examining the extracted tissue under a microscope. Much of that flood of information, however, is inconclusive: elevated levels of PSA don't always mean that you have cancer, and normal levels of PSA don't always mean that you don't—and, in any case, there's debate about what constitutes a "normal" PSA level. Nor is the biopsy definitive: because what a pathologist is looking for is early evidence of cancer—and in many cases merely something that might one day turn into cancer—two equally skilled pathologists can easily look at the same sample and disagree about whether there is any cancer present. Even if they do agree, they may disagree about the benefits of treatment, given that most prostate cancers grow so slowly that they never cause problems. The urologist is now charged with the task of making sense of a maze of unreliable and conflicting claims. He is no longer confirming the presence of a malignancy. He's predicting it, and the certainties of his predecessors have been replaced with outcomes that can only be said to be "highly probable" or "tentatively estimated." What medical progress has meant for prostate cancer—and, as the physician H. Gilbert Welch argues in his book "Should I Be Tested for Cancer?," for virtually every other cancer as well—is the transformation of diagnosis from a puzzle to a mystery.

That same transformation is happening in the intelligence world as well. During the Cold War, the broad context of our relationship with the Soviet bloc was stable and predictable. What we didn't know was details. As Gregory Treverton, who was a former vice-chair



of the National Intelligence Council, writes in his book "Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information":

> Then the pressing questions that preoccupied intelligence were puzzles, ones that could, in principle, have been answered definitively if only the information had been available: How big was the Soviet economy? How many missiles did the Soviet Union have? Had it launched a "bolt from the blue" attack? These puzzles were intelligence's stock-in-trade during the Cold War.

With the collapse of the Eastern bloc, Treverton and others have argued that the situation facing the intelligence community has turned upside down. Now most of the world is open, not closed. Intelligence officers aren't dependent on scraps from spies. They are inundated with information. Solving puzzles remains critical: we still want to know precisely where Osama bin Laden is hiding, where North Korea's nuclear-weapons facilities are situated. But mysteries increasingly take center stage. The stable and predictable divisions of East and West have been shattered. Now the task of the intelligence analyst is to help policymakers navigate the disorder. Several years ago, Admiral Bobby R. Inman was asked by a congressional commission what changes he thought would strengthen America's intelligence system. Inman used to head the National Security Agency, the nation's premier puzzle-solving authority, and was once the deputy director of the C.I.A. He was the embodiment of the Cold War intelligence structure. His answer: revive the State Department, the one part of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment that isn't considered to be in the intelligence business at all. In a post-Cold War world of "openly available information," Inman said, "what you need are observers with language ability, with understanding of the religions, cultures of the countries they're observing." Inman thought we needed fewer spies and more slightly batty geniuses.

Enron revealed that the financial community needs to make the same transition. "In order for an economy to have an adequate system of financial reporting, it is not enough that companies make disclosures of financial information," the Yale law professor Jonathan Macey wrote in a landmark law-review article that encouraged many to rethink the Enron case. "In addition, it is vital that there be a set of financial intermediaries, who are at least as competent and sophisticated at receiving, processing, and interpreting financial information . . . as the companies are at delivering it." Puzzles are "transmitter-dependent"; they turn on what we are told. Mysteries are "receiver dependent"; they turn on the skills of the listener, and Macey argues that, as Enron's business practices grew more complicated, it was Wall Street's responsibility to keep pace.

"Sorry, Mom. Sorry, Pop."

Victor Fleischer, who teaches at the University of Colorado Law School, points out that one of the critical clues about Enron's condition lay in the fact that it paid no income tax in four of its last five years. Enron's use of mark-to-market accounting and S.P.E.s was an accounting game that made the company look as though it were earning far more money than it was. But the I.R.S. doesn't accept mark-to-market accounting; you pay tax on income when you actually receive that income. And, from the I.R.S.'s perspective, all of Enron's fantastically complex maneuvering around its S.P.E.s was, as Fleischer puts it, "a non-event": until the partnership actually sells the asset—and makes either a profit or a loss—an S.P.E. is just an accounting fiction. Enron wasn't paying any taxes because, in the eyes of the I.R.S., Enron wasn't making any money.

If you looked at Enron from the perspective of the tax code, that is, you would have seen a very different picture of the company than if you had looked through the more traditional lens of the accounting profession. But in order to do that you would have to be trained in the tax code and be familiar with its particular conventions and intricacies, and know what questions to ask. "The fact of the gap between [Enron's] accounting income and taxable income was easily observed," Fleischer notes, but not the source of the gap. "The tax code requires special training."

Woodward and Bernstein didn't have any special training. They were in their twenties at the time of Watergate. In "All the President's Men," they even joke about their inexperience: Woodward's expertise was mainly in office politics; Bernstein was a college dropout. But it hardly mattered, because coverups, whistle-blowers, secret tapes, and exposés—the principal elements of the puzzle—all require the application of energy and persistence, which are the

"Did you ever start to do something and then forget what the heck it was?"

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virtues of youth. Mysteries demand experience and insight. Woodward and Bernstein would never have broken the Enron story.

"There have been scandals in corporate history where people are really making stuff up, but this wasn't a criminal enterprise of that kind," Macey says. "Enron was vanishingly close, in my view, to having complied with the accounting rules. They were going over the edge, just a little bit. And this kind of financial fraud—where people are simply stretching the truth—falls into the area that analysts and short-sellers are supposed to ferret out. The truth wasn't hidden. But you'd have to look at their financial statements, and you would have to say to yourself, 'What's that about?' It's almost as if they were saying, 'We're doing some really sleazy stuff in footnote 42, and if you want to know more about it ask us.' And that's the thing. Nobody did."

Alexander George, in his history of propaganda analysis, looked at hundreds of the inferences drawn by the American analysts about the Nazis, and concluded that an astonishing eighty-one per cent of them were accurate. George's account, however, spends almost as much time on the propaganda analysts' failures as on their successes. It was the British, for example, who did the best work on the V-1 rocket problem. They systematically tracked the "occurrence and volume" of Nazi reprisal threats, which is how they were able to pinpoint things like the setback suffered by the V-1 program in August of 1943 (it turned out that Allied bombs had caused serious damage) and the date of the Nazi V-1 rocket launch. K Street's analysis was lacklustre in comparison. George writes that the Americans "did not develop analytical techniques and hypotheses of sufficient refinement," relying instead on "impressionistic" analysis. George was himself one of the slightly batty geniuses of K Street, and, of course, he could easily have excused his former colleagues. They never left their desks, after all. All they had to deal with was propaganda, and their big source was Goebbels, who was a liar, a thief, and a drunk. But that is puzzle thinking. In the case of puzzles, we put the offending target, the C.E.O., in jail for twenty-four years and assume that our work is done. Mysteries require that we revisit our list of culprits and be willing to spread the blame a little more broadly. Because if you can't find the truth in a mystery—even a mystery shrouded in propaganda—it's not just the fault of the propagandist. It's your fault as well.

In the spring of 1998, Macey notes, a group of six students at Cornell University's business school decided to do their term project on Enron. "It was for an advanced financial-statement-analysis class taught by a guy at Cornell called Charles Lee, who is pretty famous in financial circles," one member of the group, Jay Krueger, recalls. In the first part of the semester, Lee had led his students through a series of intensive case studies, teaching them techniques and sophisticated tools to make sense of the vast amounts of information that companies disclose in their annual reports and S.E.C. filings. Then the students picked a company and went off on their own. "One of the second-years had a summer-internship interview with Enron, and he was very interested in the energy sector," Krueger went on. "So he said, 'Let's do them.' It was about a six-week project, half a semester. Lots of group meetings. It was a ratio analysis, which is pretty standard business-school fare. You know, take fifty different financial ratios, then lay that on top of every piece of information you could find out about the company, the businesses, how their performance compared to other competitors."

The people in the group reviewed Enron's accounting practices as best they could. They analyzed each of Enron's businesses, in succession. They used statistical tools, designed to find telltale patterns in the company's financial performance—the Beneish model, the Lev and Thiagarajan indicators, the Edwards-Bell-Ohlsen analysis—and made their way through pages and pages of footnotes. "We really had a lot of questions about what was going on with their business model," Krueger said. The students' conclusions were straightforward. Enron was pursuing a far riskier strategy than its competitors. There were clear signs that "Enron may be manipulating its earnings." The stock was then at forty-eight dollars—at its peak, two years later, it was almost double that—but the students found it overvalued. The report was posted on the Web site of the Cornell University business school, where it has been, ever since, for anyone who cared to read twenty-three pages of analysis. The students' recommendation was on the first page, in boldfaced type: "Sell." ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

BIG PICTURES

Hollywood looks for a future.

BY DAVID DENBY

The device was as elegant as an old cigarette case and not much larger than a child's palm. I was holding a video iPod, poised at the frontier of a new digital age, a new platform for movies, a new convenience that will annihilate old paradigms. Last spring and summer, when I visited a number of executives and tech guys in big-studio Hollywood, I kept hearing disdain for the mall cinemas and the multiplexes—the theatres in which most Americans see movies. And I heard a new mantra: “Content on demand—when you want it, where you want it, and how you want it.” By the end of the summer, movies were beginning to flow into homes and portable devices through the Internet. In September, Apple began offering previously released Disney movies through its iTunes Store. I downloaded the first “Pirates of the Caribbean” onto my hard drive, then put it onto a video iPod. The screen was only two inches across.

If you are sitting down, the natural place for an iPod is in your lap; that way, your arms don't get tired. At that distance, however, I couldn't focus on the image. So I rested the iPod on my stomach. And there it sat, riding up and down every time I took a breath. I was on the Black Pearl, all right, standing on her foredeck like a drunken sailor as she plowed through heavy seas. The horizon line kept pitching and heaving, and I had trouble seeing much of anything. “Pirates” has lots of wide vistas and noisy tumult—a vast ocean under the dazzling sun and nighttime roughhousing in colonial towns, with deep-cleavaged prostitutes and toothless drunks. What I saw, mainly, was a looming ship the size of a twig, patches of sparkling blue, and a face or a skull flashing by. The interiors were as dark as caves. My ears, fed by headphones, were filled with such details as the chafing of hawsers and feet stomping on straw, but there below me Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom were duelling like two angry mosquitoes in a jar.

In a theatre, you *submit* to a screen; you want to be mastered by it, not struggle to get cozy with it. Of course, no one will ever be forced to look at movies on a pipsqueak display—at home, most grownups will look at downloaded films on a computer screen, or they'll transfer them to a big flat-screen TV. Yet the video iPod and other handheld devices are being sold as movie-exhibition spaces, and they certainly will function that way for kids. According to home-entertainment specialists I spoke to in Hollywood, many kids are “platform agnostic”—that is, they will look at movies on any screen at all, large or small. Most kids don't have bellies, and they can pretzel their limbs into almost any shape they want, so they can get comfortable with a handheld device; they can also take it onto a school bus, down the street, into bed, cuddling it under the covers after lights-out.

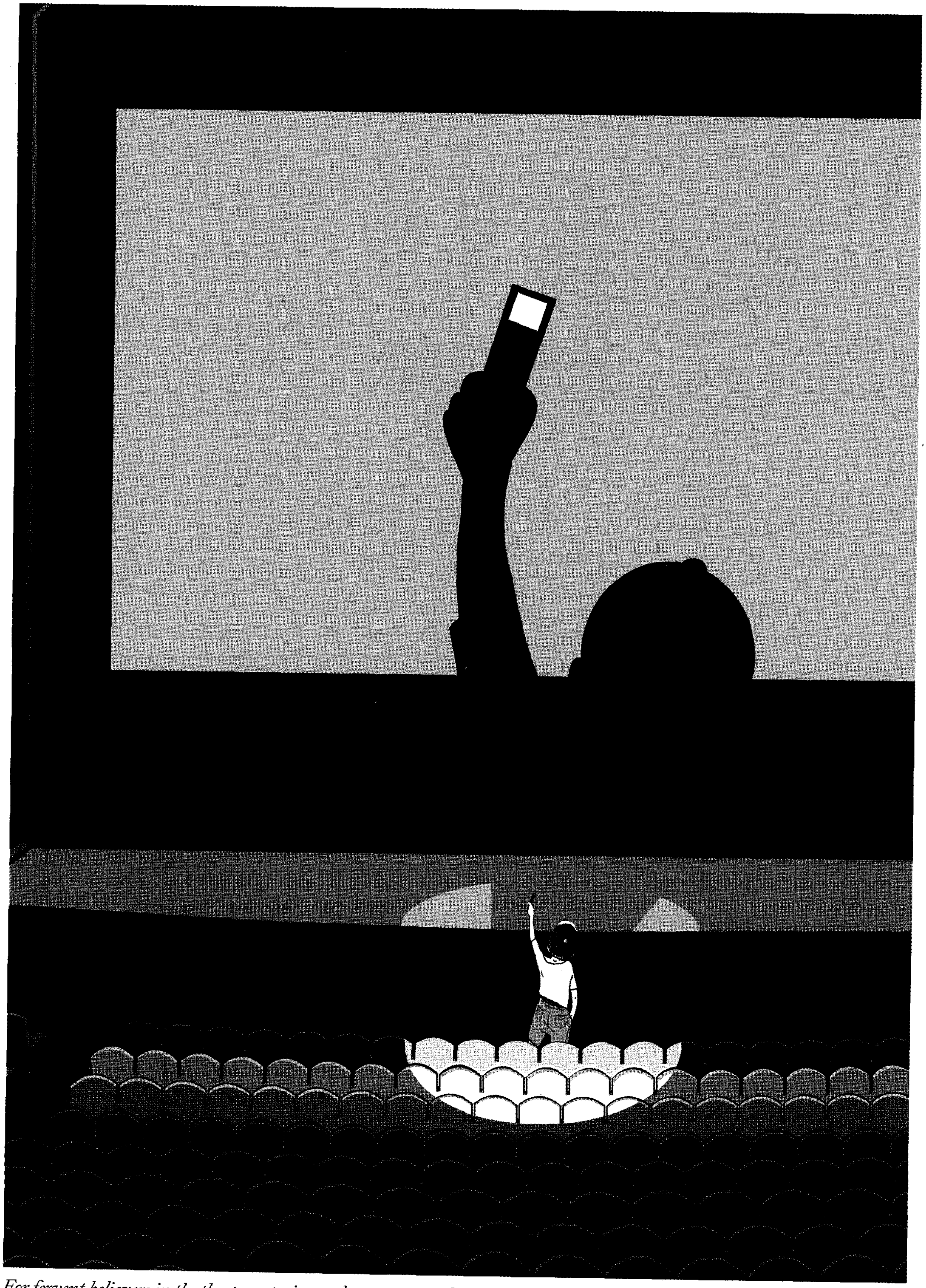
The movies currently offered by Apple and other downloading services are the first trickles of a flood. Soon, new movies will come pouring through the Internet and perhaps through cable franchises as well, and people will look at them on screens of all sizes. For those of us who are not agnostics but fervent believers in the theatrical experience, this latest development in movie distribution is of more than casual interest.

The skeletons danced on shipboard; their bones looked like pieces of string dipped in Elmer's glue. With a groan, I tried to suppress memories of a camel train making its stately way across a seventy-foot-wide screen in “Lawrence of Arabia.” On the iPod the camels would traverse my thumb. Where, I wondered, were movies going? Were they going any place good?

Talk of distributing movies over the Internet has been around for years, but it has sharpened in recent months as Hollywood has run into financial trouble. In the middle of the summer, the studios were clearly undergoing a contraction and what some even called a “panic.” They laid off hundreds of employees; they made one of their periodic attempts to control runaway star salaries and production budgets, cancelling, for example, comedies with stars like Jim Carrey and Ben Stiller which were budgeted at more than a hundred million dollars. In the future, as writers, directors, and actors try to gain a better percentage of revenue derived from the Internet, labor disputes look inevitable.

At first glance, the cause of the problem was a little mysterious: domestic box-office, after a dip in 2005, was up again (and has remained up), and overseas box-office was healthy, too. But theatrical grosses actually account for less than twenty per cent of total movie revenues. Despite the to-do in the media every weekend over what's No. 1 and what's No. 2, and how the take for “Crushed Knees 3” compares with that for “Crushed Knees 2,” the theatres bring in much less money than other revenue streams—sales to television in all its forms (free, cable, pay-per-view) and rentals and sales of DVDs, which make up half of total movie revenues. Not that the theatres are financially unimportant: in general, the more noise made about a movie when it opens, the bigger the eventual return from the ancillary markets, which is one reason the studios still contend to be the weekend box-office champ. In crude terms, the theatres can be seen as a branding device and a stimulant to DVD sales. In August, when Tom Cruise's production deal with Paramount Pictures, Viacom's film division, ended, Sumner Redstone, the chairman of Viacom, mentioned Cruise's controversial public behavior, which, he said, hurt the box-office for Paramount's summer release of the third “Mission: Impossible” movie. What Redstone didn't say, as Edward Jay Epstein reported in the *Financial Times*, was that Cruise had a

ISTVAN BANYAI



For fervent believers in the theatre experience, the most recent development in movie distribution is of more than casual interest.

HARVEY'S PLACE
TONITE 5-8 IS STRING THEORY BULLSHIT?

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deal with Paramount which gave him an enormous share of the DVD revenue on the movie. "M:i:III" cost a hundred and fifty million dollars to make, and its worldwide theatrical gross was almost four hundred million. But Paramount realized that after the theatres took their cut, and the production, promotion, and overhead costs were deducted from what was left, it wasn't going to make much money—maybe none—while Cruise would walk away with seventy million dollars.

The disappointing performance of "M:i:III" came at a painful moment for the studios. After years of double-digit growth, DVD sales, while still high, have levelled off and cancelled out the recovery at the box office. Furthermore, no one knows if the technology that could juice up sales again—the new high-definition players and high-definition versions of movies—will take off. Consumers may simply tire of the format wars between the two kinds of players (Blu-ray and HD DVD) and stick with what they've got. As one executive told me, summing up the panic, "As long as over-all revenue was increasing, people here felt comfortable with rising costs. But if revenue flattens out, the movie business could enter a death spiral."

What should the studios do? They could cut production costs, or they could reduce the cost of getting movies to the public. Loaded into cans, movies weigh between fifty and eighty pounds; they have to be flown to regional depositories, and then trucked to theatres. If a movie flops, the theatres have to wait for a new one to replace it. But once the theatres convert to digital projection—a change now in its beginning stages—the studios could bounce movies to theatres off satellites or send them on portable hard drives. I spoke to Barry Meyer, the chairman and C.E.O. of Warner Bros. Entertainment, in a wood-panelled conference room adjacent to his office, in Warner's venerable Burbank headquarters. "Digital distribution is easy, ubiquitous, and inexpensive," Meyer said. He took a deep breath. "We have to adapt, or we'll become dinosaurs."

The seven major studios, with their many divisions, produce or pick up for distribution most of the American "content" that is sent all over the world. Should they continue to shoot on film or switch to digital? Digital technology opens enormous possibilities for filmmakers, and even for exhibitors, but it also offers a radical break with the many ways of watching movies that have given us pleasure in the past. Every kind of screen comes with its own aesthetic, and imposes its own social experience on moviegoers. We've all watched hundreds of movies on old TVs, and taken endless pleasure from doing so, but to watch "Citizen Kane" on TV for the first time is a half-fulfilled promise; to see it on a big screen is a revelation. If watching movies at home becomes not just an auxiliary to theatregoing but a replacement of it, a visual art form will decline, and become something else. Kids who get hooked on watching movies on a portable handheld device will be settling for a lesser experience, even if they don't yet know it—even if they never know it. And their consumer choices could affect the rest of us, just as they have in the music business. If the future of movies as an art form is at stake, we are all in this together.

The old downtown picture palaces have been gone so long that to think of them at all is to indulge in nostalgia for nostalgia, a faintly remembered dream from childhood of cathedral lobbies and ushers in red uniforms with gold braid. The palaces had names like the Alhambra, the Luxor, the Roxy; the auditoriums were evocative of pagoda pavilions or Persian courts or some celestial paradise with flocks of fleecy blond cherubim suspended in blue ether. They were uninhibited American kitsch, the product of a commercial culture dizzied by fantasies of European or Eastern magnificence. The absurdity of the theatres—imperial spaces for democratic man—was reassuring; they were the perfect environment for an art form that was so lovable precisely because it was devoted to the unending appeal of illusion.

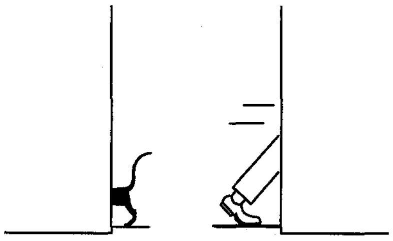
The neighborhood theatres that thrived at the same time were easier to deal with. Slipping in and out of them, we avoided the stern white-shoed matrons who patrolled the aisles; sometimes we arrived in the middle of the movie and stayed on until it reached the same point in the next show—we just wanted to go to the movies. Even now, moviegoing is informal and spontaneous. Still, we long to be overwhelmed by that flush of emotion when image, language, movement, and music merge. We have just entered from the impersonal streets, and suddenly we are alone but not alone, the sighing and shifting all around hitting us like the pressures of the weather in an open field. The movie theatre is a public space that encourages private pleasures: as we watch, everything we are—our senses, our past, our unconscious—reaches out to the screen. The experience is the opposite of escape; it is more like absolute engagement.

Such is the ideal. But how often do we find it now? Consider the mall or the urban multiplex. The steady rain of contempt that I heard Hollywood executives direct at the theatres has been amplified, a dozen times over, by friends and strangers alike. The concession stands were wrathfully noted, with their "small" Cokes in which you could drown a rabbit, their candy bars the size of cow patties; add to that the pre-movie purgatory padded out to thirty minutes with ads, coming attractions, public-service announcements, theatre-chain logos, enticements for kitty-kat clubs and Ukrainian bakeries—anything to delay the movie and send you back to the concession stand, where the theatres make forty per cent of their profits. If you go to a thriller, you may sit through coming attractions for five or six action movies, with bodies bursting out of windows and flaming cars flipping through the air—a long stretch of convulsive imagery from what seems like a single terrible movie that you've seen before. At poorly run multiplexes, projector bulbs go dim, the prints develop scratches or turn yellow, the soles of your shoes stick to the floor, people jabber on cell phones, and rumbles and blasts bleed through the walls.

If we want to see something badly enough, we go, of course, and once everyone settles down we can still enjoy ourselves. But we go amid murmurs of discontent, and the discontent will only get louder as the theatre complexes age. Many of them were randomly and cheaply built in response to what George Lucas conclusively demonstrated with "Star Wars," in 1977: that a pop movie heavily advertised on national television could open simultaneously in theatres across the country and attract enormous opening-weekend audiences. As these theatres age, the gold leaf doesn't slowly peel off fluted columns. They rot, like disused industrial spaces. They have become the detritus of what seems, on a bad day, like a dying culture.

The studio heads and production chiefs who furnish the multiplexes with movies are powerful figures in Hollywood. But in the giant conglomerates of which the movie divisions are a part they are no more than high-level managers. Their job, baldly stated, is to keep revenue flowing and to buoy the parent company's stock price. They work under enormous pressure. I was just joking when I said to Michael Lynton, the chairman and C.E.O. of Sony Pictures Entertainment, in the studio's creamy executive offices in Culver City, that no actor or director has ever received a phone call saying, "I have to face stock analysts in three weeks. What does fourth-quarter revenue look like?" But Lynton quickly retorted, "I've had that call." As a result of the pressure, the executives fashion a good deal of their films for the opening-weekend audiences—mostly families and people aged twelve to twenty-five. That is the simplest reason that the content of so many big-studio movies—fantasy, animation, inspirational sports stories, dumb-guy comedies—seems infantile and repetitive through so much of the year.

Let's not allow regret to turn into honeyed glances at a high-minded time that never was. Studio moviemaking has always been a big-money game. According to *Forbes*, the most expensive movie ever made remains the 1963 "Cleopatra," which, in 2006 dollars, cost Twentieth Century Fox close to three hundred million. And there never was a golden age in which art or great entertainment poured unremittingly from the studio gates. The majority of movies at any time are junk. From 1953, we remember "From Here to Eternity" and "The Band Wagon" and maybe "The Big Heat," but not "The Redhead from Wyoming" or "Guerrilla Girl." For most people, memory itself is a kind of revival house in which only the most vivid things survive. But if there was never a golden age there were a few structures that encouraged superior work—or at least didn't actively defeat it. One was the contract model of the nineteen-thirties and forties in which, to cite the most obvious miracle, the producer Hal B. Wallis, at Warner Bros., was able to put together "Casablanca" with actors, screenwriters, set designers, and a director who could all be found eating lunch at the commissary on the Warner lot. The contract model, which many actors hated but which often made good use of their talents, fed a system in which most of the stable genres—women's films, Westerns, sophisticated comedies, period literary adaptations, crime films, psychological dramas, and all the varieties of noir—were aimed at the grownup audience. Another productive structure arose in the fifties, during a period of loosened studio control when directors like Nicholas Ray, Anthony Mann, and Douglas Sirk did highly idiosyncratic work. Still another was the director-controlled model of the early and mid-seventies, when the studio executives, baffled by the tastes of the new young audience, turned to such recent film-school graduates as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg, as well as Robert Altman (who was a generation older). Operating freely, these directors turned out a series of remarkable movies with complexly motivated characters and startlingly original forms and moods.



The current big-studio model is not only aesthetically depressing but financially bizarre. The familiarity of the numbers makes them no less astonishing. The average cost of making a big-studio movie is sixty million dollars; the average cost of marketing one domestically is around thirty-six million. Would-be blockbusters, or "tent pole" movies, like "King Kong" or "The Da Vinci Code," which open simultaneously around the world, can run to three hundred million or more in total costs. Any big-studio movie is a bet against long odds. A worldwide theatrical gross of around four hundred million apiece for "M:i:III" and "Superman Returns" does not insure that either movie will be profitable, even though some of the ancillary-market dollar has yet to arrive. The five hundred and fifty million dollars taken in by "King Kong" was also considered disappointing.

How much theatrical gross is enough? Recent editions of *Variety* have featured an ad for the second "Pirates" movie that shows how much. A skull-and-crossbones motif is positioned over a number one followed by nine zeroes. That death's-head billionaire, by luring studios to fresh big-budget follies, could hurt the movie business for years. Everyone wants the big kill and the bragging rights that come with it. Despite the flops and the movies that only break even, gambling has always been part of the excitement of working in Hollywood. Yet some gambles are surely worth more than others. Reviving James Bond with acid wit and a sexy new star is fine. But "Superman Returns," with its underwritten script and its bland hero, was not just boring but superfluous: in the digital years since the 1978 "Superman"—which have also seen five "Batman"s, two "Spider-Man"s, and three "X-Men"s—the airborne crusader has lost his wonder. But Warner, in late October, announced that it would make yet another "Superman" film. *Variety* earlier summed up the situation as follows: "Many speculate that WB has invested too much time and money to walk away. What's more, the film fuels a number of Time Warner outlets, including homevid, ancillaries, and merchandising—even subsid DC Comics."

So there you have it: the business model swallows the studio, which, obliged to supply its conglomerate outlets and subsidiaries, cannot prevent itself from repeating a failure. The studios have been reining in budgets, but Paramount, Disney, Fox, and M-G-M, a moribund studio in renewal mode, have at the same time been ransacking their own libraries as well as comic books and children's-lit classics for titles they can turn into monster spectacles. These movies, which will tie up billions of dollars in resources, are not necessarily the ones that audiences want but the ones that the conglomerate parent company thinks it can sell. Peter Bart, the editor-in-chief of *Variety*, who was an executive at Paramount in the seventies, put it to me this way: "During the late sixties and seventies, the studios would look at the box-office results and conclude, 'Aha, the audience is responding to "Midnight Cowboy" and "The Graduate." ' Today, the conglomerates are saying, 'We have the resources to tell the public what it wants to see.' " But for how long? Teen-agers are making their own movies and showing them on YouTube and MySpace. They're multitasking for fun, with computer games, instant messaging, and television. They may be unwilling to sit in a darkened theatre for two hours, submitting to someone else's control.

There are, of course, many other kinds of movies besides would-be tent poles and sophomoric comedies, and, in fairness to Warner Bros., it did release "Syriana" in 2005 and "Blood Diamond" and "The Good German" this year, three films that could be called ambitious descendants of "Casablanca." But the balance is way off, and has been for more than two decades. Young people get many more movies sent their way than are warranted by their numbers—almost half of the audience but only twenty-five per cent of the population is aged between twelve and thirty. After that, the group that goes to the movies most frequently is people in their thirties and forties, who make up about a third of both the population and the audience. People over fifty make up thirty per cent of the population but only twenty per cent of the audience. The trouble is that grownups are less likely than kids to go on opening weekends (they wait for reviews and reports from friends), so, apart from the fall awards season, when most of the serious movies are released, they don't pull their weight in terms of what gets made. As a result, the studios have conceived grownup moviegoing behavior in such a way that confines it to an enclosed circle. When the adult audience does go to a low- or mid-budget movie released in winter or in spring—say, "Crash" or "Inside Man"—the studios consider the hit an anomaly, a "non-repeatable event." In the jargon of the trade, such movies are "execution dependent" (they have to be good to succeed), rather than "audience dependent" (the audience will show up regardless of the quality). Some execution-dependent movies, such as "Inside Man," "The Devil Wears Prada," and "Sideways," are hits by any standard. Some, like "The Squid and the Whale" and "Capote," haven't made big money but are still counted as successes in relation to their costs. Others, like "Little Children," are financial failures, although that film, a stubborn and prickly plant, played through the fall to loyal audiences, and may pick up some awards attention and, with it, added box-office. Many more people go to bad movies than go to good ones, but the good small movies that do well, like "Brokeback Mountain" and "Borat," are, in relation to cost, among the most successful movies ever made.

The ability to repeat "non-repeatable" events requires judgment. Popular plot elements can be codified by computer and laid into scripts like Sheetrock, but no amount of audience analysis can replace instinct, taste, and daring, not to mention acting, directing, and cinematography. What computer analysis could synthesize "Borat"? The studio heads, however much they try to shorten the odds, must choose talent over formula. If they can't do that, they should get out of the way, or soon enough cheaper ways of making movies may push them out.

The executives complain about the theatres, but the second-rate, dispirited atmosphere of so many multiplexes is part of the world they have made, complete with its tiresome, meaningless annual cycle of pictures that storm the media beachhead and wash out with the tide, and the overloaded fall seasons with doleful dramas about depression, suicide, addiction, and random death. Theatre attendance is holding up, but if the audience gets weary and chooses to watch movies at home we have to understand what we are doing not only to an art form but to ourselves.

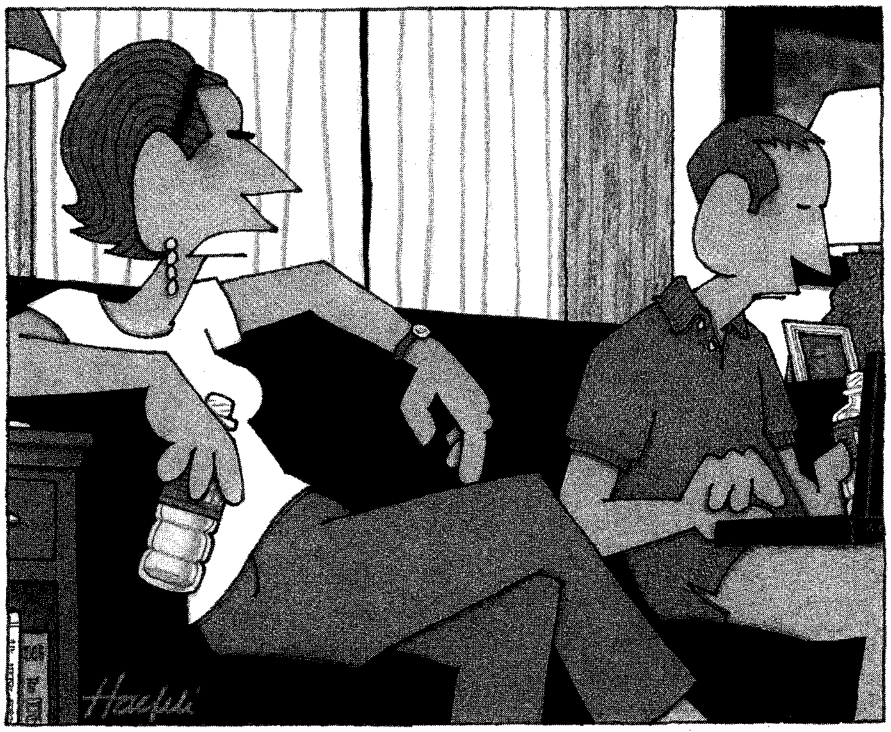
At the house of my friend Harry Pearson, who started the high-end video magazine *The Perfect Vision*, I watched movies on what must be close to the ultimate home-theatre system, a setup priced at two hundred thousand dollars. I thought that a glimpse of the best now available might be a way of anticipating the affordable future. It was also tremendous fun. Harry's system uses a digital projector suspended from the ceiling, which fed a movie screen nine feet across the diagonal. Various electronic components decoded or upgraded the digital information or sent the sound to multiple speakers positioned around the room. The player was one of the new HD DVD sets made by Toshiba, and the experience of watching what it produced on that screen was like putting on a stronger pair of glasses for the first time: everything was brighter, crisper, more sharply defined—*newer* somehow, as if it had been freshly created, even though one of the movies we watched was a half century old. (Digital transfers are made by scanning a film negative or a print; technicians then digitally enhance the images.) With amazement, we watched a DVD of John Ford's 1956 masterpiece, "The Searchers," which is widely considered to be one of the most successful transfers of an old movie. The southwestern sky above Monument Valley was a brilliant azure; the desert was not a mass of orange-brown glop but grains of sand and pieces of rock; and, inside the pioneers' cabin, details normally hidden in shadow, like drying corn hanging from the ceiling, were clearly visible. And so it was with a recent film. When Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby" opened two years ago, I referred to the Hit Pit—the gym where much of the action takes place—as "sweat-stained" and a "relic." But the high-definition transfer of the film, bringing shapes and textures out of the murk, revealed a gym that was old and shabby but also tidy and scrubbed clean.

Yet, though the detail was extraordinary, the image was different from a film image, and strange in some ways. In film, the illusion of three-dimensionality is produced by the laws of perspective, by the manipulation of focus, and by the subtleties of lighting: we are led into depth by gradations of color or, in black-and-white movies, by shades of gray. A digital transfer compacts color and increases contrast, so, in the early attempts—say, from a decade ago—the actors looked almost like cutouts against a flat background, their flesh tones waxy and doll-like. The images didn't breathe the way the original film images did—the faces seemed to have lost their pores. But high-definition digital produces a more nuanced gradation of color and a more definite molding of the face—you see planes and hollows. To my eyes, both in digital transfers and in movies that were shot digitally, flesh still looks a little synthetic, but it looks better than before, and no doubt it will look even better in a few years. ("You want pores, we'll give you pores," a digital technician in Los Angeles told me.) The image was steady, too, in a way that a film image is not. A film, after all, gets pulled into place in a projector by pins entering and then withdrawing from sprocket holes; the image onscreen can jiggle a bit. On Harry's system I noticed an evenness, steadiness, and hard focus into the far reaches of the screen, and also the absence of earlier digital artifacts, like a black edge around shapes or a flaring of solid whites.

All in all, high definition is a big improvement over standard digital imagery, though in truth I admire it without loving it. To arrive at a film print ready for exhibition, the image has to go through at least four generations—from negative to positive, and then back and forth again—and, by the end, the multiple printing produces some minor softening and darkening of color. I like the way color blends on film: the image is painterly and atmospheric; more poetic, perhaps, than a digital image; lyrical rather than analytic. I may have seen more of the Hit Pit in the high-definition transfer, but expressive metaphor had yielded to workaday reality. I was happier with my earlier sense of the gym as a place of defeat redeemed by Clint Eastwood and Morgan Freeman. And I think that Eastwood, having directed almost thirty films, may have intended "Million Dollar Baby" to look the way it looks on film.

At home, watching an old movie that once engulfed us, we yearn for more emotion, more color, more meaning. If we can't get it, we have to fill it in from memory, the way someone listening to a beloved piece of music on the beach will fill in instrumental color and rhythms wiped out by a roaring surf. A few days after my session at Harry Pearson's, I went to a friend's house and sat alone, looking at some familiar old movies on an excellent forty-two-inch gas-plasma screen fed by a standard DVD player. The classic 1940 comedy "The Philadelphia Story," starring Katharine Hepburn, James Stewart, and Cary Grant, came pretty fully to life. The high-def screen yielded such benefits of M-G-M's glamour years as the sheen (from backlighting) on Hepburn's hair and the satiny white look of the studio's imagined Main Line mansion. Few of the visual qualities were lost, and the fanged upper-class banter is so peculiarly intimate that it played very well at home.

Switching to color and to something that was largely digital and high-tech to begin with—the first "Spider-Man," from 2002—I scored again. The director, Sam Raimi, went for a hard-edged jolt, with solid colors and the surging, swinging movement of the Marvel Comics style, and his graphics still looked sensational. There was little reality to capture—the movie, at its best, was pure artifice and pop rapture. But Scorsese's "Taxi Driver," from 1976—a neo-noir film that exaggerated aspects



"When you say, 'I love you,' is it just to remind yourself?"

of reality into something that was the opposite of pop—was a dud at home. What I loved in the theatre was the encompassing lurid rawness: the hookers, pimps, and thugs prowling the neon-red streets. On the home screen, the steam rising from the manholes—Dante's burning underground lake percolating in Manhattan—didn't loom up and envelop me, and the bloody violence at the end didn't explode in my face. The big plasma screen seemed inadequate; I was constantly aware of the outer edge of the frame just when I wanted to abandon myself within it, yielding to the power and sensuality that Scorsese and the cinematographer, Michael Chapman, had achieved. It wasn't good, and it was worse than a diminution: it was a betrayal.

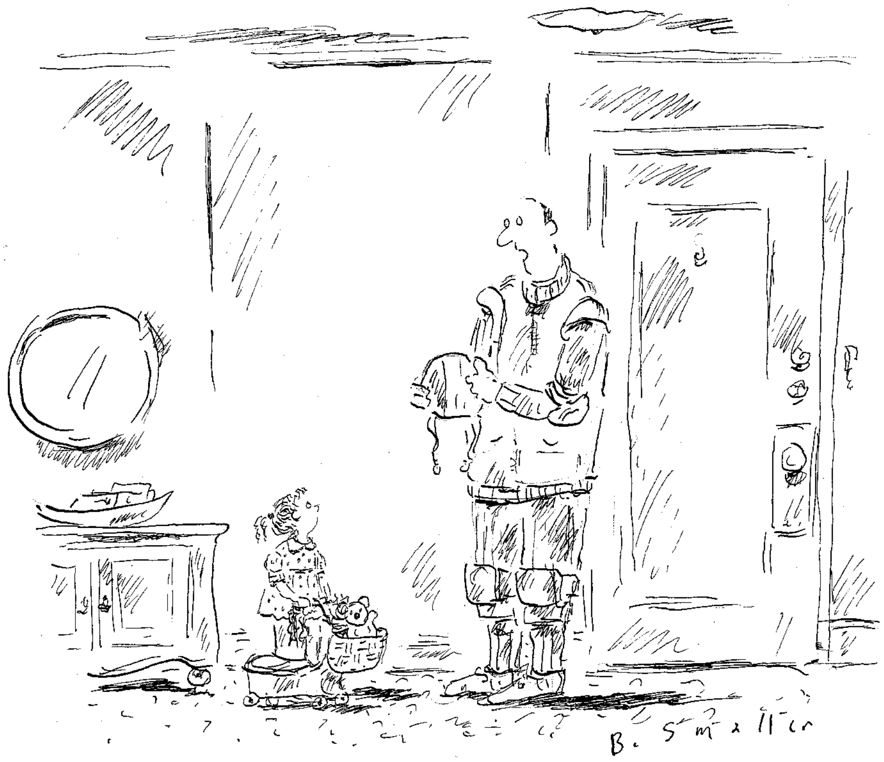
No exhibition method is innocent of aesthetic qualities. Platform agnosticism may flourish among kids, but platform neutrality doesn't exist. Fifty years ago, the length of a pop single was influenced by what would fit on a forty-five-r.p.m. seven-inch disk. The length and the episodic structure of the Victorian novel—Dickens's novels, especially—were at least partly created by writers and editors working on deadline for monthly periodicals. Television, for a variety of commercial and spatial reasons, developed the single-set or two-set sitcom. Format always affects form, and the exhibition space changes what's exhibited.

I looked at "Brokeback Mountain" on a portable DVD player with a seven-inch screen and headphones—the kind of rig people use on airplanes and in jury waiting rooms. The focus was precise, the color bright. And, through the headphones, I heard such extraordinary details as the *flip-flip-flip* of the rain on the tent when Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger are up in the mountains. Yet there was something wrong. I was not *in* the mountains. The grandeur of the terrain is not something the men are necessarily conscious of, but the massiveness of the mountain range, the startling clarity of the air, the violence of the weather enlarge the experience of feelings they have no words for and can't control. If you watch the movie on a small screen, you're not living within this great breathing, palpable place. The small screen takes the emotion out of the landscape.

The experience was dissatisfying in other ways, too. Having a highly detailed soundtrack in your head and a reduced image before your eyes is an oddly unsettling experience. It's as if the movie had been pulled back to the editing stage, before the sound and picture were "married." You are reminded of the obvious reason that theatres have put speakers behind the screen all these years—so that the words seem to be coming out of the characters' mouths. In "Brokeback," as a storm breaks, the lightning flashed onscreen, but the thunder roared in my head.

"Brokeback" was made by Universal's specialty division, Focus Features, which is led by the writer-producer James Schamus, who works out of a loft in an old building on Bleecker Street that has high ceilings, oak floors, and chic exposed air ducts painted white. Insofar as one can speak of a hip movie scene existing above the independent level, the specialty divisions are it. Schamus, a short, fast-talking man, is a longtime collaborator of Ang Lee's; he served as both a producer and screenwriter on "The Ice Storm," "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," and other movies. In the past few years, Focus has been jumping. Its recent releases include "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," "The Motorcycle Diaries," "The Constant Gardener," "Brick," and "Pride & Prejudice." To get these movies made, Schamus, like the other specialty-division mini-moguls, practices a very tight economy. "I make as many bad movies as a big studio," he said to me cheerfully. "But when they make a bad movie they spend forty to sixty million telling everyone about it. When I make a bad one, it gets a round of applause at a film festival."

The specialty divisions, which now include Fox Searchlight, Sony Pictures Classics, Paramount Vantage, Miramax, and Warner Independent Pictures, have been around, in one form or another, since the early nineties. For the studios, they serve multiple functions. They perform well as a laboratory for the kind of pictures that the studio can't make, or doesn't want to make; they employ a thrifty business model that the studio itself is unwilling to put into practice; they serve as the studio's conscience and, increasingly, as its representative in the Academy Awards nominations, where they have scored heavily in recent years. In return, the specialty di-



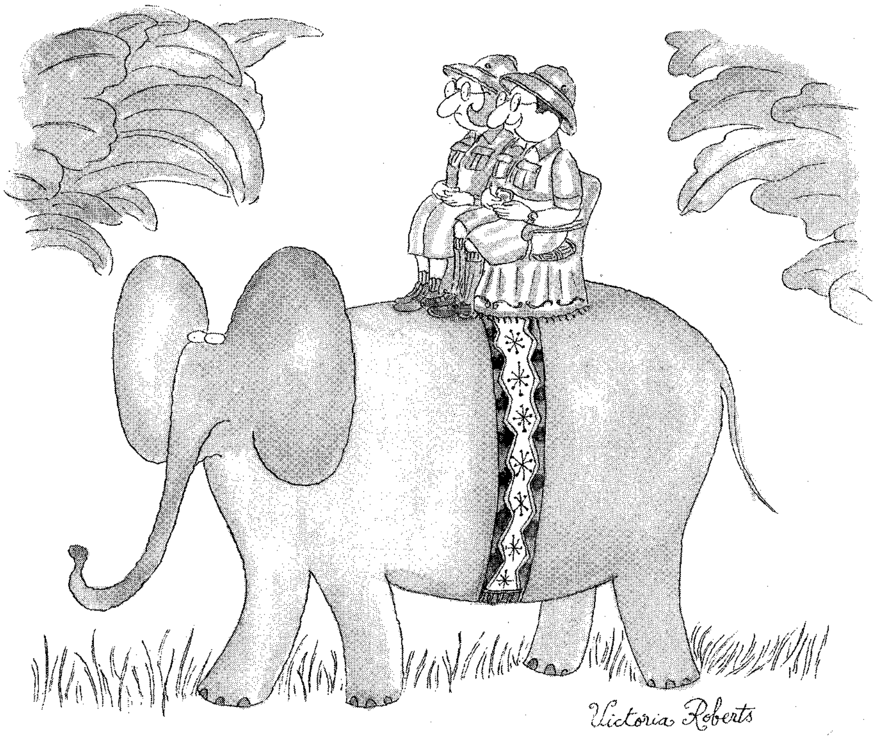
"Daddy doesn't ride his bike for fun—Daddy rides his bike to raise his pulse rate."

visions gain access, when they need it, to the parent company's distribution and promotion wings. But most of the time they run on their own. In effect, they have taken over the business model (and many of the artists) of the independent scene. The drill goes like this: Spend between five and twenty million dollars on production; devote most of your movies to character-driven plots or experimental forms; and use smart young actors or established performers who are willing to work on the cheap, like Nicole Kidman and George Clooney.

The office of Schamus's opposite number at Fox Searchlight, Peter Rice, is not in the comfortable main headquarters at Fox's Century City lot but in a small building that looks out on a parking alley. After the company's triumph with "Sideways" and "Napoleon Dynamite" in 2004, it had an artistic and financial off year in 2005, but it came back in 2006 with "Thank You for Smoking" and "Little Miss Sunshine"; it also picked up distribution rights for "The Last King of Scotland," "The History Boys," and "Notes on a Scandal." Searchlight acquired "Little Miss Sunshine," its most successful film so far this year, at the Sundance Film Festival, for ten and a half million dollars, opened it at just seven theatres in July, then gradually enlarged the run, reaching more than sixteen hundred theatres by the beginning of September. The movie has now grossed more than eighty-four million dollars worldwide.

Rice, a forty-year-old Englishman, speaks quietly and calmly but has an unnerving way of staring at you as he talks. "We have a movie environment now of limitless choice," he said, speaking of the large number of small movies opening at any given time. "Mediocrity will be punished, and punished severely." He then told me about one of his flops, "Bee Season"—which wasn't a mediocrity but a well-designed, well-acted film that didn't quite hit the mark. It cost fourteen million dollars to make and had a worldwide theatrical gross of less than seven million. "We will lose, when everything is in, maybe two to three million," Rice explained. "If it had cost forty million, we would have spent so much on marketing that, even with the ancillary take, we would have lost much more."

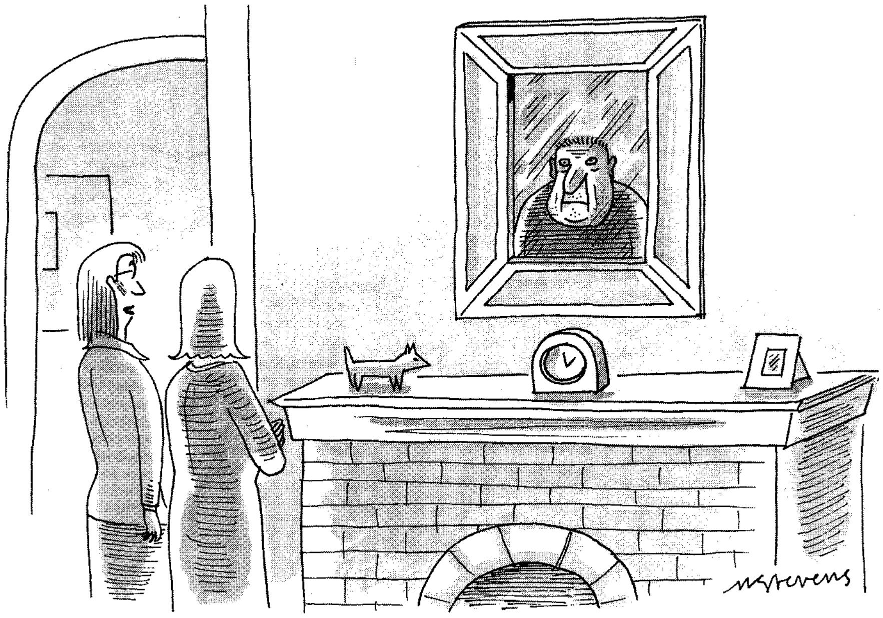
The specialty divisions have learned from the follies of the parent companies. A thirty-second spot for a big movie on one of the four TV networks costs up to six hundred thousand dollars; a full-page color ad in the Sunday *Times* costs a hundred and sixty thousand. But young people, the largest market for big movies, don't read many newspapers, and they are barely aware of the networks. Why should the studios spend millions chasing them? Rice's problems exist on a smaller scale. If two prints, say, of a Searchlight film like "Thank You for Smoking," a satire of the "sin" lobby, are playing theatrically in a given market, is it worth sustaining a sizable ad in the local newspapers week after week?



"Well, now we know what the world looks like from the top of an elephant."

Ads produce a general awareness of a film, but they don't necessarily persuade people to go see it. "You don't need eighty per cent of the entire public to know about your movie," Rice said. "You need one hundred per cent of those whom the movie is *for*. If we can reach that audience, we can do this kind of filmmaking profitably." The specialty-division chiefs have embraced the intricacies of niche marketing, finding their way to the interested parties—hitting a fraction of the audience through Web sites. In the usual studio parlance, the audience is divided into four quadrants—younger men, younger women, older men, older women. To promote "Brokeback," for example, Schamus and his marketing people polled women who did volunteer work on a weekly basis to find out what Web sites they visited. These women, generally older, were of a compassionate nature, they reasoned, so Focus advertised on those sites.

"Brokeback" cost fourteen million dollars to make, and its worldwide theatrical gross is a hundred and eighty million. Still, Schamus's strategy for its domestic marketing makes me a little uneasy. Perhaps "Brokeback," with its "taboo" subject matter, needed to be sold in a specialized way, but "The Constant Gardener," which broke no taboos, was also niche-marketed, through political blogs. We're enormously lucky to have such movies, but the assumptions about the audience they appeal to are a little dismaying. In the past, commercially successful artists like Alfred Hitchcock, Preston Sturges, George Cukor, John Ford, and Billy Wilder would have been astonished if anyone had told them that they could succeed



"That's not a portrait—it's actually Leonard."

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with only slivers of the audience. They thought they were working for everybody, and often they were. Today, with a few exceptions like Ang Lee, Scorsese, Spielberg, and Eastwood (and not necessarily with all their movies), the artistically ambitious director who is considered to have universal or even widespread appeal is an endangered species. Part of the reason, perhaps, is that directors are working for an audience more diverse than the audience of fifty or sixty years ago. The most important reason, however, is that, by splitting the audience into a spectacle-and-comedy, opening-weekend crowd and a specialty-division urban élite, the studios have given up the old dream of movies as an art form for everyone.

Four or five years from now, there will be a big box in your den, study, or living room connected to the Internet. It will collect music and TV shows and also movies, both new and old. You will be able to burn these movies onto DVDs on the box and play them in another room. Or there will be a device that allows you to send them to your TV wirelessly. The children will transfer movies onto one portable device or another, and then squirrel themselves away somewhere, free from brothers, sisters, and parents; or they will take a copy to a friend's house and load it onto a screen there. Their parents will watch many of the movies at home, on screens that will get bigger and bigger, eventually covering an entire wall.

The quality of DVDs will still be better than that of downloaded movies, especially if high-definition players catch on, so DVDs, however flattened or diminished in sales, are in no danger of disappearing in the near future. But what about the theatres? There are thirty-eight thousand screens in the United States, spread over six thousand sites. Do we need that many? I spoke to John Fithian, the president of the National Association of Theatre Owners, the Washington lobbying group that promotes the theatre chains' interests in Congress. When Fithian is in Los Angeles, he operates from a plain office in North Hollywood, where he recently told me that digitizing theatrical projection is the key to survival. "We're competing with the high-tech home-entertainment crowd, and we're using a technology in theatres that's a hundred years old," he said. "We need to modernize existing theatres, and tear down old ones at the same rate."

Only about two thousand theatres (about five per cent) have digital projection now, but Fithian estimates that as many as four thousand screens could be digital in two years, and the majority of them within five. "In ten years, I doubt there will be any more film," he said, a shift that would cause major battles—Spielberg and M. Night Shyamalan, for instance, want to continue shooting and exhibiting their films in the traditional way. To what extent digital can continue to improve visually will probably determine its fate among directors. (Mel Gibson believes in it, and used it well in "Apocalypto.") There's no doubt, however, that digital projection will transform the multiplexes. As the critic Godfrey Cheshire predicted seven years ago, theatres will show more than just movies (and a few have already started doing so). They could show high-quality broadcasts of the Olympics, or political rallies, or religious revivals, or concerts. "Suppose a music company is kicking off the release of a new CD with a concert in Los Angeles," Fithian said. "People could watch the concert all over the country."

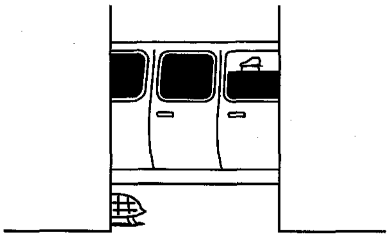
Even after digitization, the number of screens will probably diminish—perhaps by as much as thirty or forty per cent in ten years. But the movie theatres, as tawdry and unwelcoming as many of them are, are unlikely to vanish. The studio executives may be planning to distribute movies through the Internet, but they know the value of the theatrical experience. As Tom Rothman, the chairman of Fox Filmed Entertainment, said to me, "There is something about the commonality of the experience that is irreplaceable." Rothman, who grew up in theatres, knows the excitement of a full house, "the infectious urgency of movies." And executives can remember what it was like to be twenty-one. "You want to have sex with someone," Schamus said. "You say, 'Do you want to go the movies with me Friday night?' Movies are a pretext for social interaction. So don't think of the future in terms of technology. It's not a question of platforms but of how people want to use social spaces, how given ethnic and age groups want to interact." I hope Schamus is right, because even people who like going to movies alone don't necessarily go to *be* alone. In a marvellous paradox, the people around us both relieve us of isolation and drive us deeper into our own responses.

A theatrical opening, for better or worse, will remain an event. The opening creates and aggregates the publicity—the ads, the magazine covers, the newspaper and television interviews, the cable "documentaries" about the making of the picture, the hundreds of reviews, the ceaseless nattering of blogs. If the studios send too many movies home, it will be hard to distinguish them from television. How will they sell them as *movies*? "It's not going to be any one thing exclusively," the Warner chairman Barry Meyer said. "Digital allows you to explore a lot of things, but there will always be a model of going to the multiplex to see a big movie with special effects. Other movies—maybe you see them on DVD, or through downloads, maybe it goes to an iPod. There are smaller movies that we are releasing theatrically today that in five years we might be releasing direct to video."

Meyer's division into large and small pictures makes me wince, since small pictures look better on a big screen, too. But independent filmmakers may not feel the same way. Access to an unlimited audience through the Internet may be an irresistible lure. Richard Linklater, who makes both commercial comedies like "School of Rock" and intimate, low-budget movies like the "Before Sunrise" and "Before Sunset" duo, told me that his small movies reach the larger cities and some of the college towns but never make it to many suburban multiplexes or to rural areas. Linklater said, "On the Internet, the people who have been shut out of the national conversation on those movies will now be able to take part in it, and for the independent filmmaker that's an incredible gain." For the beginning filmmaker, the game is afoot. Shooting with lightweight digital equipment, he could put together a feature-length movie for very little money and then distribute it through the Internet. All he needs is ability and a cast and crew open to adventure.

Big digital spectacles that click with the audience make so much money for the conglomerates that it's impossible to imagine that the studios will ever stop making them. But it is crazy to spend almost a hundred million dollars to make and market a routine movie. The big-studio business model has its uses—overhead costs can be buried in a production budget—but it's bound to break down someday. Steven Soderbergh is one director who is positively evangelical about reform. He has an alternative business plan, which he put into practice with "The Good German," that goes like this: The A-list talent (actors, directors, writers) work for relatively small up-front payments—not the market-driven "quotes" of five or ten or even twenty million but a "nominal" fee of, say, a million or two. (If the talent doesn't like this arrangement, they can be paid more up front but they will have to forfeit special arrangements, like "gross points," which are paid later.) When revenues start coming in, the take is divided according to fixed percentages. If the studio and its financing partners have put up the production budget, they get the biggest piece—say, fifty or sixty cents of every dollar. Star A gets six cents, star B five, writer X two, and so on. If the movie is a bomb theatrically, the ancillary markets will minimize the studio's loss, as they do now. If the movie is a hit, everyone owns a piece of it forever. And the artistic payoff is a lessening of fear. "If the initial outlay is kept down this way," Soderbergh said to me, "then there's a good chance that the studios will make more interesting choices of material."

At the moment, the smart money may be going small budget. Just recently, wealthy individuals, pooling their money in hedge funds, have begun setting up deals not with studios but with successful producers like Joel Silver and producer-directors like Ivan Reitman. The production money will go to genre films—thrillers and comedies and horror pictures—in the low-budget (about twenty-million-dollar) range. John C. Malone, the chairman of Liberty Media Corporation, is opening his own studio to make movies on a similar scale. Some of these pictures will undoubtedly be routine, but the relatively low stakes could also allow producers to hire writers and directors who are willing to do more daring work, the way B-movie directors, toiling quietly on back lots, did sixty years ago.



Films made fast and cheap in this way would still need studio distribution and marketing, but once the theatres go digital that may no longer be true. Distribution is the key to freedom. In the future, what is to stop a group of producers, directors, and writers from forming a coöperative, raising money for a slate of films, and hiring non-studio distribution and promotion people to get the movies to digitized theatres—liberating themselves at last?

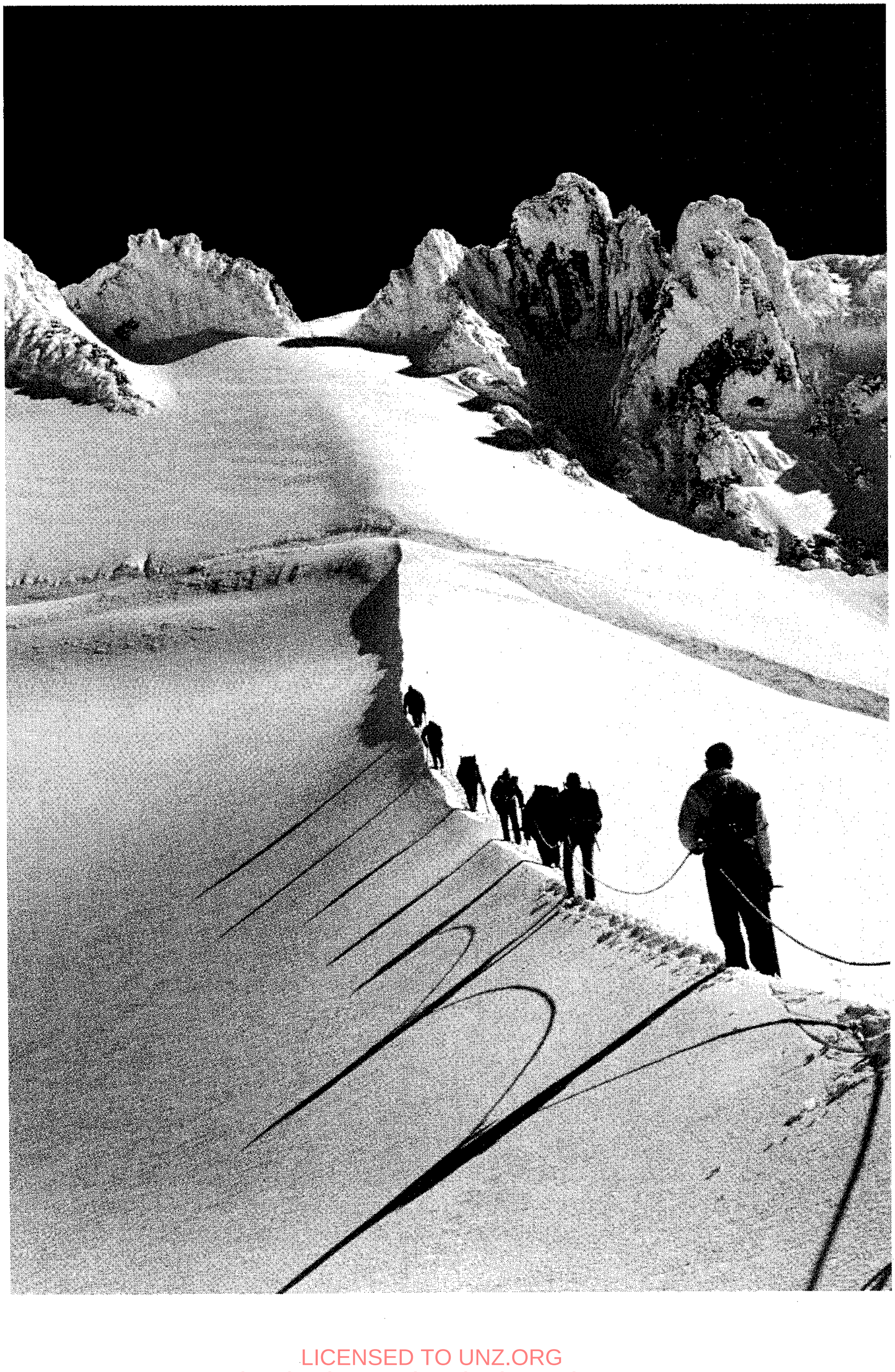
The lobby contains a restaurant, a bar, and a book-and-gift shop. Before the movie, people hang out and have a drink or leaf through a hot new novel or a movie-star biography. The rest rooms are spotless, and the concession stand serves delicious coffee. All the seats are reserved, and they are plush, with plenty of legroom. The steeply raked auditorium is dark, and insulated from the sound of the other theatres in the same multiplex. Is this some sort of upper-bourgeois dream of the great good place? A padded cell for wealthy movie nuts? No, it's an actual multiplex, the ArcLight, on Sunset Boulevard near Vine.

The idea of user-friendly theatres may be catching on. Sumner Redstone's daughter Shari, the president of National Amusements, the family-owned theatre business, has vowed to convert half the lobbies of the chain's hundred and nineteen theatres to social spaces with comfortable lounges, and to build more. Martinis will be served; newspapers and magazines will be offered. If theatres go in this Starbucks-plus-cocktails direction, the older audience might come back, with a positive effect on filmmaking, and the value of the movies as an art form and an experience could be preserved. After you are seated at the ArcLight, an usher standing at the front of the auditorium tells you who wrote and directed the movie and how long it is. He promises that he and another usher will stay for a while to make sure that the projection and the sound are up to snuff. There are no advertisements following his speech, and only four coming attractions. The movie begins, and you are utterly lost in it. ♦

FICTION

BEAR MEAT

BY PRIMO LEVI



Evenings spent in a mountain hut are among the most sublime and intense that life holds. I mean a real hut, the kind where you seek shelter after a four-, five-, or six-hour climb and where you find few so-called comforts.

Not that chairlifts and cable cars and such comforts are to be looked down on: they are, on the contrary, logical achievements of our society, which is what it is, and must be either accepted or rejected in its totality—and those who are able to reject it are few. But the advent of the chairlift puts an end to a valuable process of natural selection, by which those who reach the hut are sure to find, in its pure state, a small sample of a little-known human subspecies.

Its members are people who don't speak much and of whom others don't speak at all, so there is no mention of them in the literature of most countries, and they should not be confused with other, vaguely similar types, who do speak, and of whom others speak: hot shots, extreme climbers, members of famous international expeditions, professionals, etc. All worthy people, but this story is not about them.

I arrived at the hut at sunset, and I was very tired. I stayed outside, on the wooden porch, to consider the frozen mystery of the seracs at my feet until everything had vanished behind silent ghosts of fog, and then I went in.

Inside it was almost dark. By the glow of a small carbide lamp one could distinguish a dozen human figures gathered around three or four tables. I sat down at a table and opened my backpack. Across from me was a tall, large man, middle-aged, with whom I exchanged a few words about the weather and our plans for the following day. This is a standard conversation, like the classic opening moves of a chess game, where what matters, much more than what one says (which is brief and obvious), is the tone in which one says it.

We found ourselves in agreement on the fact that the weather was uncertain (it always is in the mountains; when it isn't, it is nonetheless declared to be so, for obvious magical reasons), and on the forecast for the following day. A little later, two lanky men in their twenties entered, with long beards and ravenous eyes. They had arrived from another valley and were attempting an intricate series of crossings. They sat down at our table.

After we had eaten, we started to drink. Wine is a more complex substance than one might think, and, above two thousand metres, and at close to zero degrees centigrade, it displays interesting behavioral anomalies. It changes flavor, loses the bite of alcohol, and regains the mildness of the grape from which it comes. One can take it in heavy doses without any undesired effects. In fact, it eliminates fatigue, loosens and warms the limbs, and leads to a fanciful mood. It is no longer a luxury or a vice but a metabolic necessity, like water on the plains. It is a well-known fact that vines grow better on a slope: could there be a connection?

Once we started drinking, the conversation at our table became much less impersonal. Each of us spoke of our initiation, and we established with some surprise that we had all begun our mountaineering careers with an extremely foolish act.

As it turned out, the best of these foolish acts, and the best told, was the one recounted by the tall, large man.

"I was fifteen. A friend of mine, Saverio, was also fifteen. Another, Luigi, was seventeen. We had gone out a number of times together, to fifteen hundred, two thousand metres, without a plan or a destination; I should say, without a conscious destination, but, in essence, impelled by a subtle desire to get ourselves in trouble and then get ourselves out of it. Nothing easier: it's enough to go straight up the mountain following your instincts, in any direction, by the steepest slope, struggle for a quarter of an hour across the mountainside, and then try to get back down. Of course, one also learns a few things in this process: that pine trees, when they're available, make safe and friendly supports, especially during the descent, and that scree is hard to climb but easy to descend by. One learns different types of grasses, those peculiar terraced slopes, and the art of losing the trail and finding it again. Above all, one learns the limits, both quantitative and qualitative, of one's own strength: when the breath, the legs, and the heart give out, and when, so to speak, it's psychosomatic. It's a great school—I wish I had attended it longer.

"September came and we felt like lions. Luigi said, 'The G. Pass is twenty-four hundred metres high—eleven hundred vertical metres from here. According to the guidebooks, it should be a three-hour climb, but it'll take us barely two. There's nothing difficult, just scree and small rocks—no snow this time of year. On the other side, there's a six-hundred-metre descent, one hour, and we arrive at the border-patrol hut; you can see it clearly here on the map. Then an easy return along the road. We'll leave at two today; at four we're at the top, at five at the hut, and home in time for dinner.'

"That was Luigi. We met at his house at two, with our good boots on our feet, but no backpacks, no rope (about whose use none of us had any real notion anyway; but we knew—having studied the Alpine Club guidebook—the theory of the double rope, the respective merits of hemp and manila, the technique for rescuing someone from a crevasse, and other fine points), a hundred grams of chocolate in our pockets, and (may God forgive us!) wearing shorts.

"We progressed well uphill. First, through a pine forest, spurning the mule trail and the shortcuts, and sampling the blueberries; then through an alluvial cone, wasting precious energy. It was the first time we had set off without grownups getting on our nerves with all their advice, without uncles, without experts. We were drunk on our freedom, and because of this, we delighted in the dirtiest high-school slang, accompanying it with lofty quotations from the classics, for example:

> "It is another path that you must take . . .
> if you would leave this savage wilderness";

Or:

> That was no path for those with cloaks of lead,
> for he and I—he, light; I, with support—
> could hardly make it up from spur to spur.

And also:

> . . . he'd see another spur,
> saying: "That is the one you will grip next,
> but try it first to see if it is firm."

"Forgive me if I get a little carried

CORBIS

away. You see, I'm not a Dante expert, and yet, believe me, one of these days an honest man will come along and prove that Dante couldn't have just invented these founding principles of rock climbing—he must have been here or in a similar place. And when he says:

> Remember, reader, if you've ever been
> caught in the mountains by a mist through which
> you only saw as moles see through their skin—

I congratulate him! I, for one, never doubted that he was a professional.

"At any rate, we were climbing at a brisk pace, saying and doing foolish things. And so it happened that we reached the pass at six, not at four, near collapse, and with a certain trembling in our knees that wasn't just from exhaustion. Saverio was the worst off. Luigi and I were already at the top and saw him struggling among the loose rocks fifty metres below us. ‘ "Now you must cast aside your laziness!" ’ Luigi had the gall to shout to him. At which the poor boy paused to catch his breath, looked upward like Christ on the Cross, then clambered up to us and breathed out, in a faint voice, the implausible yet utterly correct reply: ‘ "Go on, for I am strong and confident." ’

"When all three of us were at the pass, two unhappy truths became clear. One, that night was falling; and I swear on this bottle that I have never since then (and many years have passed) seen darkness fall in the mountains without feeling an emptiness here in the pit of my stomach. The other truth was that we were trapped.

"From the pass, there was no logical descent to the hut. There was a gentle, rocky valley, with no human trace, and beyond it a terrifying precipice, not vertical, no, but of broken rock and gullies of crumbling earth—one of those places no one ever wants to go because you'll break your neck without glory or satisfaction.

"With the last light, we pushed on all the way to the edge: you could see the big dark leap of the valley and, if you stuck your nose out, even the light in the hut, almost beneath you. But as for getting down there on our own, we couldn't even consider it; we sat there and started shouting. We took turns. Saverio shouted and prayed. Luigi shouted and cursed. I just shouted. We shouted until we were hoarse.

"Toward midnight, the light in the hut split into two lights, and one of the two blinked three times. It was a signal: we shouted three times in response. At that, a faraway voice called, 'We're coming,' and we replied with a cacophony of shouts. The voice asked, 'Where are you?,' and we three, without a single match to strike, blurted out confused and irrelevant information, all at the same time.

"Our rescuers, poor devils, cursed as they climbed, and stopped now and then to sing, drink, and laugh loudly. They weren't very enthusiastic. Many years later, I also happened to be part of a rescue party, so I know exactly how they felt. These expeditions are tedious and dangerous affairs, and in most cases they can only lead to trouble, because no one wants to pay for the emergency supplies—least of all the rescued, who are rarely solvent.

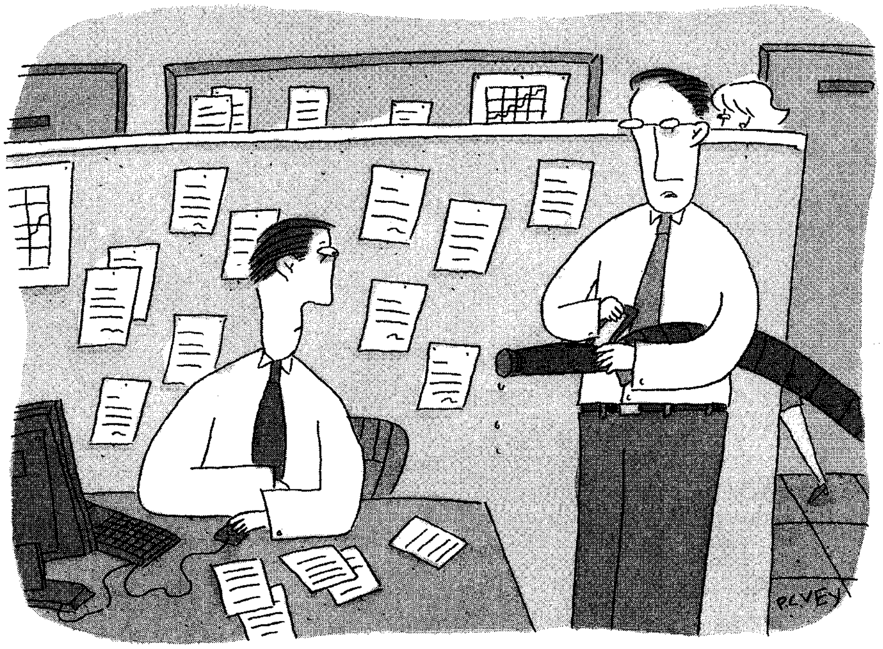
"They reached us at around two in the morning; and here I must tell you that, on top of everything else, they were members of the border patrol. Once they'd found us, a signal was sent to the valley with a flashlight. 'Who are they?' a voice asked from below. 'It's just three whiny *gagno*' was the fierce reply, in dialect. Then, turning to us, 'Is this what they teach you in school?'

"After that, they tied us up like salami and lowered us down to the valley without talking to us but stopping often to drink, and curse, and guffaw among themselves. Pass me the bottle, please."

I passed the narrator the bottle and asked him what a *gagno* was.

"*Gagno*," he said, "means child, but it's a word loaded with mockery. Second-grade kids say it to first graders.

"That's how I started. It's not a story to be proud of, you might say. And I'm not. But I'm sure that even this foolish adventure was useful to me later. These are things that make your back broad, which isn't something Nature gives everyone. I read somewhere—and the person who wrote this was not a mountaineer but a sailor—that the sea's only gifts are harsh blows and, occasionally, the chance to feel strong. Now, I don't know much about the sea, but I do know that that's the way it is here. And I also know how important it is in life not necessarily to be strong but to feel strong, to measure yourself at least once, to find yourself at least once in the most ancient of human conditions, facing blind, deaf stone alone, with nothing to help you but your own hands and your own head. . . . But, excuse me, that's another story. The one I told you ends like this. They called me 'whiny *gagno*' for years. Some people still do and, I assure you, I don't mind at all."



"In lieu of the surprise drug tests, they're just hosing everybody down."

He drank, and silently busied himself with the complex rituals of a pipe smoker.

"I, too, started with an extremely foolish act," a voice interjected at this point, and then we noticed that there were no longer four of us but five at the table. The voice had come from a man who, in the dim light, appeared to be thin, balding at the temples, with a sharp face furrowed by shifting wrinkles. He told his story at an uneven pace, swallowing his words and leaving sentences incomplete, as if his tongue had difficulty following the thread of his thoughts; at other times he struggled to find the words and would stop as if under a spell.

"There were three of us, too, but not so young—in our twenties. One was Antonio, and I wouldn't want to say much about him, nor would I know how to. He was a fine, handsome youth, smart, sensitive, tenacious, and bold, but with something in him that was elusive, dark, wild. We were at that age when you have the need and the instinct and the immodesty to inflict on others everything that is seething in your head and elsewhere; it's an age that can last a long time, but ends at the first compromise. Yet with him, even at that age, nothing had slipped out of his wrapping of restraint; nothing escaped from his inner world—though we sensed it to be rich and dense—except some rare allusion dramatically cut short. He was like a cat, if I may put it this way, whom you live with for years but who never allows you to get under his sacred skin.

"The third was Carlo, our leader. He is dead; it's best to say it right away, because one can't help speaking in a different way of the dead than of the living. He died in a way that suited him—not in the mountains, but the way one dies in the mountains. Doing what he had to do: not the kind of duty imposed by someone else, or by the state, but the kind that one chooses for oneself. He would have put it differently, called it 'reaching the end of the line,' for example, because he didn't like big words, or, for that matter, words.

"He was the kind of boy who doesn't study for seven months, who is known as a rebel and a dunce, and then in the eighth month absorbs all the courses as if they were water and comes through with straight A's. He spent the summer as a shepherd—not a shepherd of souls, no, a shepherd of sheep, and not to show off or to be eccentric but happily, for love of the earth and the grass. And in the winter, whenever he got restless, he would tie his skis to his bicycle and 'go up' alone, with no money, only an artichoke in one pocket and the other full of salad. He would come back in the evening or maybe the following day, having slept who knows where, and the more storms and hunger he had endured the happier and healthier he was. When I met him, he already had a considerable mountaineering career behind him, while I was still a novice. But he was reluctant to talk about it: he wasn't the type—which I respect, because I'm like that, too—who goes into the mountains to be able to tell a story. On the other hand, it was as if no one had taught him how to speak, just as no one had taught him how to ski: because he spoke the way nobody speaks, he voiced only the essence of things.

"He seemed to be made of steel. If necessary, he could carry a backpack that weighed thirty kilos as if it were nothing, but usually he travelled without a pack: his pockets were enough. Besides the vegetables, they held a piece of bread, a pocketknife, sometimes the Alpine Club guidebook, and always a spool of wire for emergency repairs. He could walk for two days without eating, or eat three meals in one sitting and then be off. Once, I saw him at three thousand metres in February, in the sleet, bare-chested, eating calmly, a spectacle so upsetting to two men nearby that it turned their stomachs. I have a picture at home of the whole scene."

He paused, as if to catch his breath. People from the other tables had gone to bed: in the sudden silence we distinctly heard the deep roar of a serac, like the bones of a giant trying in vain to turn over in his bed of rock.

"I beg your pardon. I'm no longer young, and I know that it's a desperate endeavor to clothe a man in words. This one in particular. A man like this, when he's dead, is dead forever. He's not the kind you tell stories about or build monuments to; he's all in his actions, and, once those are over, nothing remains—

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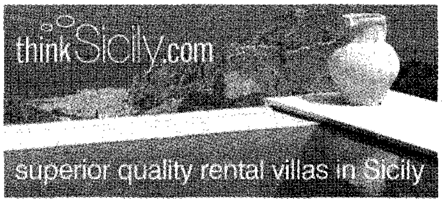
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nothing but, precisely, words. So every time I try to talk about him, to bring him back to life, as I'm doing now, I feel a great sadness, an emptiness, as if I were on a cliff, and I have to be silent, or else drink."

He was silent, and drank, and then continued.

"So one Saturday morning in February Carlo came to us. 'Tomorrow, eh?' he said. In his language, what he meant was that, since the weather was good, we could leave the next day for the winter ascent of the Tooth of M., which we had been planning for a while.

"I won't give you all the technical details. I'll tell you, briefly, that we left the following morning, not too early (Carlo didn't like watches—he felt their tacit, continuous warning as an arbitrary intrusion); that we plunged boldly into the fog; that we came out the other side at around one in the afternoon, the sun was shining, and we were on the ridge of the wrong mountain.

"Antonio said that we could go down a hundred metres or so, cross along the mountainside, and climb back up the next mountain. I, who was the most cautious and the least able, said that, while we were at it, we could just as well continue along the ridge and arrive at a different peak—it was only forty metres lower than the other one anyway—and be satisfied with that. Carlo, in perfect bad faith, said with a few harsh, cackling syllables that my proposal was fine but, then again, 'by the easy northwest ridge' we could reach the Tooth of M. in half an hour; and that it wasn't worth being twenty-one if you didn't allow yourself the luxury of taking the wrong path.

" 'The easy northwest ridge' was described rock by rock in the battered guidebook that Carlo carried in his pocket, along with the wire I mentioned. He took this guidebook along not because he believed in it but for the exact opposite reason. He rejected it because he perceived it, too, as a constraint, and not just any constraint but a bastard creature, a detestable hybrid of snow and rock and paper. He took it with him into the mountains to scorn it, delighted if he could catch it in error, even if that error was to his own detriment and that of his climbing companions.

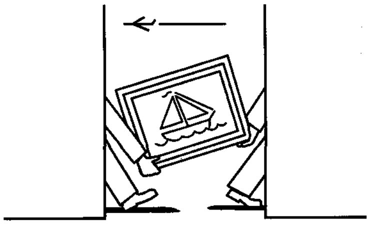
"The easy northwest ridge was truly easy, in fact elementary, in the summer, but the conditions we found that day were difficult. The rocks were wet on the side that faced the sun and glazed with ice in the shade; between one rock spike and the next were pockets of wet snow where we sank up to our shoulders. We arrived at the right peak at five, two of us dragging ourselves pitifully, while Carlo was seized by a sinister hilarity that I found slightly irritating.

" 'How will we get down?'

" 'We'll figure it out,' Carlo said, and added mysteriously, 'The worst thing that happens is we taste bear meat.'

"Well, we tasted it, bear meat, in abundance, during the course of that night, the longest of my climbing career. It took us two hours to descend, feebly assisted by the rope. I'm sure you know what an infernal instrument a frozen rope is: ours had become a stiff, evil tangle that got caught on all the outcrops and clanged against the rock like a steel cable. At seven, we reached the shore of a small frozen lake. It was dark.

"We ate the little we had left, built a useless wall of stones to shelter us from the wind, and lay down on the ground to sleep, huddled side by side. We took turns—the man in the middle slept while the others acted as a buffer. For some reason I can't explain, our watches had stopped—perhaps because we had forgotten to wind them—and without watches we felt as if time, too, had frozen. We stood up now and then to get our circulation going, and it was always the same: the wind was always blowing, there was always a semblance of moon, always in the same spot in the sky, and in front of the moon a fantastic cavalcade of ragged clouds, always the same. We had taken off our shoes, and put our feet in our backpacks. At the first ghostly light, which seemed to radiate not from the sky but from the snow, we got up, our limbs numb and our eyes glazed from sleeplessness, hunger, and darkness, and found our shoes so frozen that, when struck, they rang like bells. In order to put them on we had to sit on them for half an hour, as if we were hatching eggs.



"But we returned to the valley on our own: and when the innkeeper asked us, chuckling, how it had gone, all the while stealing glances at our two-day stubble, we answered without hesitation that it had been a great outing, paid the bill, and left without losing our composure.

"That was bear meat. Now, you must believe me, gentlemen, many years have passed, and I regret having eaten so little of it. I think and hope that each of you has gleaned from life what I have—a certain measure of ease, respect, love, and success. Well, I'll tell you the truth, none of these things, not even remotely, has the taste of bear meat: the taste of being strong and free, which means free to make mistakes; the taste of feeling young in the mountains, of being your own master, which means master of the world.

"And, trust me, I am grateful to Carlo for having deliberately got us into trouble, for the night he made us spend, and for the various enterprises, senseless only on the surface, that he involved us in later on, and then for various others, not in the mountains, which I got into on my own, by following his doctrine. He was a young man full of earthly vigor who had a wisdom of his own, and may the earth in which he rests, not far from here, lie light on his bones, and bring the news, each year, of the return of the sun and of the frost."

The second narrator fell silent, and he seemed to me to be looking with some embarrassment toward the two young men, as if afraid that he had disturbed or offended them; then he filled his glass but did not drink. His last words had roused in me a rare echo, as if I had heard them somewhere before. And, in fact, I later found almost those exact words in a book that is now dear to me, by the same sailor, cited by the first man, who had written of the gifts of the sea. ♦

(*Translated, from the Italian, by Alessandra Bastagli.*)

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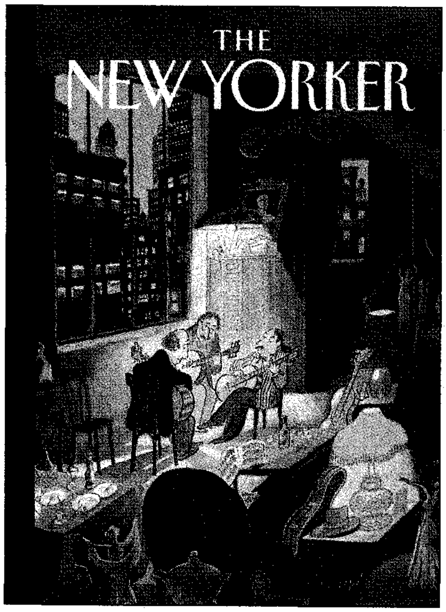
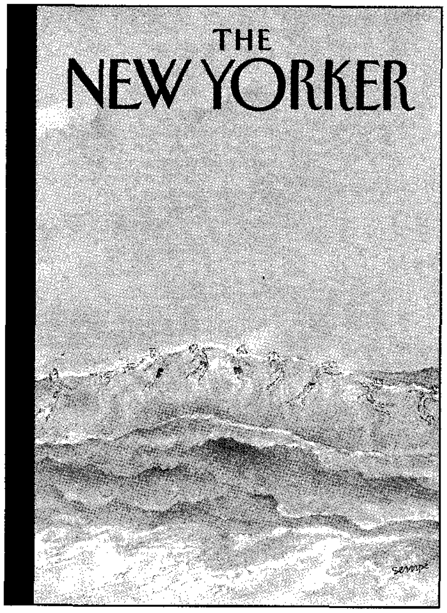
Jean-Jacques Sempé

Sempé



"Three Amigos"



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The life of the man who put words to Mozart.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Lorenzo Da Ponte, who wrote the librettos for "The Marriage of Figaro," "Don Giovanni," and "Così Fan Tutte," has been a troubling item for Mozart scholars. Almost everyone agrees that Da Ponte supplied Mozart with better texts than the composer had ever worked with, and that the operas the two men produced together are among the greatest in the international repertory. But Da Ponte's contribution has often been put down to mere cleverness, stage smarts—not art, not soul, not like Mozart. This trend may be changing. In 1985, an exemplary biography appeared, "Lorenzo Da Ponte: The Life and Times of Mozart's Librettist," by Sheila Hodges. In 2000, an English translation of Da Ponte's own "Memoirs," long out of print, was republished by New York Review Books. This year, there have been two further biographies: "The Man Who Wrote Mozart: The Extraordinary Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte" (Weidenfeld & Nicolson; £18.99), by Anthony Holden, the music critic of the London *Observer;* and "The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte—Mozart's Poet, Casanova's Friend, and Italian Opera's Impresario in America" (Bloomsbury; $29.95), by Rodney Bolt. David Cairns, in his new book, "Mozart and His Operas," praises Da Ponte lavishly and deplores other musicologists' condescension toward him. Such tributes may just be scraps thrown from the feasting table laid this past year for Mozart's two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. Nevertheless, Da Ponte is now getting some attention.

He was born in 1749, in Ceneda, a small town north of Venice. His name was Emanuele Conegliano. He was the first son of a tanner; his mother died when he was five. They were Jews. When Emanuele was fourteen, his father decided that the family would convert, to better their position. The Bishop of Ceneda, Lorenzo Da Ponte, received them into the Church. It was customary for converts to take the surname, and for eldest sons to take the full name, of the presiding priest, so Emanuele became Lorenzo Da Ponte.

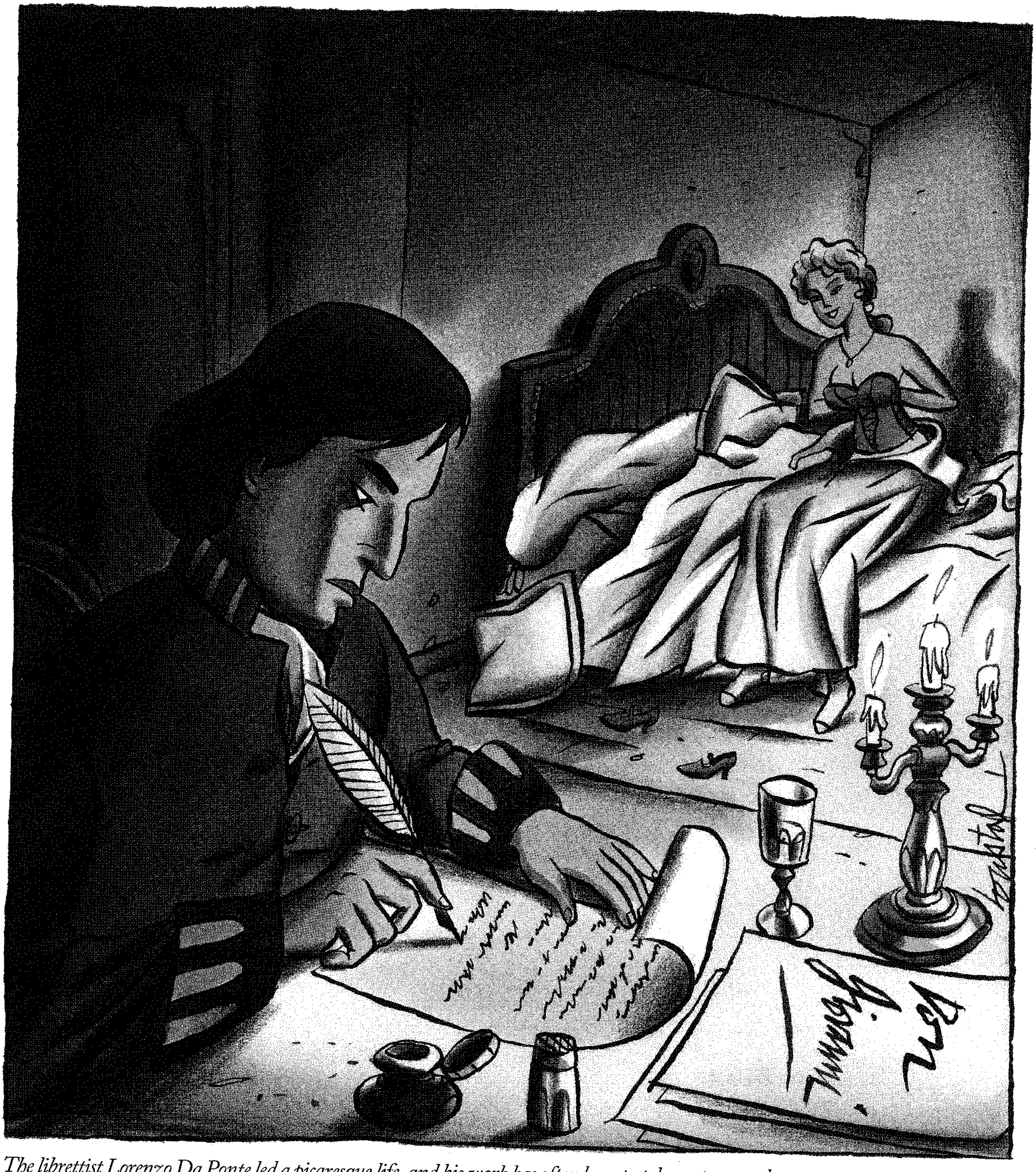
Prior to his conversion, he had had almost no education. But Bishop Da Ponte looked after his new Christians. At his expense, Lorenzo, with his two brothers, was sent to the local seminary, and there he caught up fast. After two years, he relates in his "Memoirs," he could write a long oration in Latin, together with fifty-odd lines of Latin verse, in half a day. He also acquired Hebrew and Greek. But his great passion was for Italian literature. In less than six months, he says, he memorized much of Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, and Tasso. Poetry became his obsession. In class, when he and his best friend got bored, they would compose verse, one writing one line, the other writing the next. In his own poems—of which, he says, he wrote and burned two thousand during his early years in the seminary—he emulated his classical models, "trying my hand repeatedly at every style of meter and composition, striving to imitate the most beautiful thoughts." These years of playing with poetry—translation, adaptation, collaboration, speed, joy—were his training for the notably impure, improvisatory job of eighteenth-century libretto writing.

When Lorenzo was nineteen, Bishop Da Ponte died and his subsidy of Lorenzo's tuition ended. Lorenzo was told that he could transfer to the seminary at nearby Portogruaro, but that, if he did, he would have to become a priest, a calling, he writes, "wholly contrary to my temperament, my character, my principles, and my studies." He submitted. At the new seminary, he rose quickly to the position of instructor, then professor, then vice-rector. In 1773, at the age of twenty-four, he was ordained, and six months later he escaped to Venice.

The Venetian Republic was in rapid decline at the time—twenty-four years later, it surrendered to Napoleon without a fight—but, meanwhile, the Venetians were having a party. Those who could afford to went every night to one of the city's seven opera houses. When the show was over—usually, around 2 A.M.—they repaired to the gambling houses. Carnival occupied nearly half the year. Hodges writes, "Masks were universally worn, and this gave the wearers a license that would otherwise have been impossible. It also led to a particularly classless society. . . . Nobleman and beggar, artisan and poet, gondolier and visiting royalty mingled under the clear winter sky."

This, then, was a good place for a young man who, after ten years in a cassock, was looking for some excitement, and in Venice, Da Ponte says, he devoted himself exclusively to "cards and love." The first love was Angiola Tiepolo, an impoverished noblewoman—tiny, pretty, and violent-tempered—whose husband had just left her, apparently for good reason. Da Ponte moved in with Angiola and her equally dissolute brother. Both were gambling addicts, and Da Ponte soon became one, too.

At this point, Da Ponte's book becomes a lot of fun. Events tumble out of it like kittens out of a bag, and some are quite fantastic. One evening, Da Ponte encounters a beautiful, mysterious young lady. "My name is Matilda," she says,



The librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte led a picaresque life, and his work has often been put down to mere cleverness, stage smarts.

JACQUES DE LOUSTAL

"daughter of the Duke of M___a." Her father had tried to force her to marry "an old man of horrible aspect." When she refused, she was imprisoned in an ancient castle, from which she escaped in the dark of night. Now she has arrived in Venice, and, after two meetings with Da Ponte, she begs him to run away with her. They'll be fine, she says; she has a casket of diamonds. He says he'll think about it. When he gets home, Angiola meets him at the door with a stiletto. Still he can't decide, and, while he is pondering the problem, Matilda is carried off by the Inquisition. "My grief knew no bounds," he writes, and then Matilda drops out of the narrative. Similar episodes follow, and they lend the book a kind of giddy causelessness. Never does Da Ponte try to connect the events of his life to his own character. This may be the least introspective autobiography ever written.

Da Ponte eventually broke with Angiola and went back to teaching, at a seminary in Treviso. But soon, as a result of some poems that he had written—on the Rousseauian question of whether mankind was better off in society, living under kings and laws, or in the state of nature—he was dismissed for sedition. Indeed, he was put on trial. He may not have minded this, for, as a result, he became a hero to the liberal-minded gentry of Venice. One prominent man hired him as his secretary; another as the tutor to his sons. Apparently, it was in their drawing rooms, to amuse them, that Da Ponte developed a new talent. Italy was famous for its *improvvisatori*, proto-rappers who, given a theme and a rhythm, could declaim, extempore, several hundred lines of verse at a stretch, to musical accompaniment. Da Ponte became a master improviser. Again, the future librettist floats into view.

Da Ponte ended his Venetian period in a gloriously squalid flameout. Reportedly, while working for his rich patrons, he was boarding in the house of one Laura Bellaudi, who lived with her son, Carlo, and his wife, Angioletta. Da Ponte was a charming man—bright-eyed, brilliant, good-looking—and he soon found his way into the heart, and the clothing, of Angioletta. Informed of this, Laura confronted Da Ponte, who replied that if the charge was true "may God strike me with a thunderbolt while I'm celebrating Mass!" (He was working as a priest again.) Laura backed off, but soon afterward she herself observed Da Ponte, in the doorway of his room, cheerfully exhibiting himself to Angioletta in the room opposite. He was asked to leave and he did so, but not alone. While disporting himself with Carlo's wife, he had been obliging Carlo by carrying letters between him and his mistress (who was apparently sleeping with Da Ponte as well), and before packing his bags he opened—or forged—a letter from Carlo to the mistress promising her that he was soon going to murder Angioletta. Da Ponte showed this letter to Angioletta, who agreed to elope with him. "For a while," Hodges reports, "they had rooms in brothels, where he organized the entertainments, playing the violin in his priest's garb, by now having no other." Both, it is said, had other lovers. Once, Angioletta got into a knife fight with three other women, possibly over Da Ponte. She emerged unharmed, but one of the others came out bleeding.

Eventually, Da Ponte was denounced to the authorities, and, in 1779, he was tried on the charge of *mala vita*, or bad living. In fact, his crime was probably not *mala vita*—in which many Venetians of the time were enthusiastically engaged, with no interference from the authorities—but, once again, the writing of seditious verse, this time a poem describing various dignitaries as whoremongers and the like. In any case, he was banished from the republic of Venice for fifteen years.

THE RIGHT TO PLEASURE

You would think that I go mad with grief
when the white sails fill and the keel cuts
the waters like a knife honed on whetstone:
that's the way you're taught to interpret these signs—
matted hair, the salt-dirt lines where sweat has run,
hands that feed the mouth but will not wipe it.
But when my love decides to go and then is gone,
I can still taste him, bitter in the throat; I still
feel the weight of his body as he fights sleep.
I do not fight it: on the contrary, I live there,
and what you see in me that you think grief
is the refusal to wake, that is to say, is pleasure:
qui donne du plaisir en a, and so if
when he couldn't sleep in that long still night
you sensed it and woke to show him how
to unfasten each and every button, then it is
promised you, even when he goes—

—*Jessica Fisher*

Two years later, he turned up in Vienna. En route, he had done some work for theatre and opera, and he decided he would like to try writing librettos for opera buffa, the new, realistic, comic form that was fast supplanting the old, staid, declamatory opera seria. In 1783, Emperor Joseph II, a music lover, installed an Italian opera company in Vienna's Burgtheater, and the troupe needed a "poet," or house librettist. Da Ponte wangled an interview with the Emperor, and by the end of it he had the job. How this happened is hard to say. Da Ponte had never written a full opera libretto, and he confessed as much to the Emperor. "Good, good!" he quotes Joseph as saying. "We shall have a virgin muse." But by this point in Da Ponte's memoirs we have encountered many inexplicable events, and after a while one gets into the rhythm.

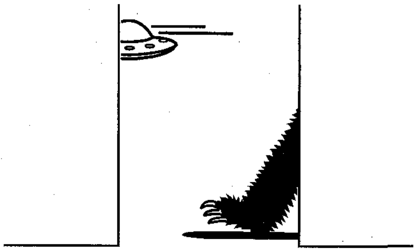
The poet of the Italian opera actually spent little of his time writing original librettos. Opera in the eighteenth century was not the museum of old treasures that it is today. It was a popular art, more like our movies or television. Most of the operas produced were new, or they were reworkings. These were the days before copyright law. The librettos of operas that had succeeded elsewhere were translated and adapted; their scores were replaced, or retailored for new casts. The leading singers—not the composers, let alone the librettists—were the best paid and most powerful people in the profession. If, as once happened to Da Ponte, a lead soprano wanted a mad scene inserted into a comic opera, because she had recently performed a mad scene in another opera and it had gone over very well, her wishes were accommodated. This meant a lot of donkey work: cutting, cobbling, fixing, on a short deadline. That, for the most part, was what Da Ponte did at the Burgtheater. Only in between did he write whole librettos.

Soon after he took up his post, he met Mozart. Mozart was a celebrity, but he had never written an opera buffa. He longed to, and he got Da Ponte to agree to write him a libretto. But Da Ponte was busy with his cut-and-paste jobs. What time he had for whole librettos he gave to well-known buffa composers, like Antonio Salieri, the court composer, and Vicente Martín y Soler, not to beginners, like Mozart. Eventually, however, the two men got back in touch, and in the space of four years they produced "The Marriage of Figaro" (1786), "Don Giovanni" (1787), and "Così Fan Tutte" (1790).

What Da Ponte brought to Mozart was, first of all, immensely singable verse, which was also elegant, economical, and witty. He also created clear, strong plots and characters interesting enough to inspire and embody the drama of Mozart's music. This is most obvious in "The Marriage of Figaro." His libretto was an adaptation of Beaumarchais's 1781 play of the same name, in which the valet Figaro, on the day of his marriage, tricks his employer, Count Almaviva, out of exercising the droit du seigneur. The play was famous, but Da Ponte did not hesitate to overhaul it for operatic purposes. He hacked away subplots and subthemes, and he cut the number of characters from sixteen to eleven. Some of these he simplified; others he amplified. The best example of the latter is the Countess. In a bold stroke, he postponed her entrance until Act II. Act I is all bustle: people chattering and arguing and telling secrets. This is the setting up of the intrigue. Then, as the curtain rises on Act II, we go from public to private, from the world to the heart. We see the Countess at last, and she is alone in her bedroom, singing "Porgi amor," her lament over the loss of her husband's love. By this means, and others, Da Ponte makes the Countess the moral center of the opera. From then on, the plot steadily thickens, the intrigues multiply, until, in Act IV, we barely know anymore who is fooling whom. Finally, once again, Da Ponte uses the Countess as his depth charge. In the last moments of the opera, all is revealed, and the Count's servants beg him to forgive them for deceiving him. He refuses: "No! No, no, no, no, no!" Then the Countess appears, and it is the Count's turn to beg. "My lady, forgive me," he says. At this moment the entire, bewildering tangle of the plot unravels, and what, before, was a multiplicity and conflict of human needs becomes one need only: mercy. The Countess pardons her husband, whereupon all the other characters' little sins dissolve in a hymn of joy. No one watching this believes that the Count will now become a faithful husband, but, for that very reason, the point of the finale—the necessity of forgiveness—is all the more urgent and moving. Da Ponte is the one who made it, and thereby allowed Mozart to make it.

But *did* Da Ponte make it first? We know that Mozart and Da Ponte worked simultaneously, and many writers have assumed that Mozart had considerable influence over Da Ponte's text. Mozart was known to be exacting with librettists. Da Ponte no doubt heeded his wishes, but to what extent? Andrew Steptoe, in his 1988 book "The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas," points out that Da Ponte's texts for Mozart, compared with his librettos for other composers, show a higher proportion of ensemble singing—Mozart's preference—over solo. To him, this suggests that Mozart was calling the shots. Sheila Hodges, on the other hand, notes how much rhyme there is in these librettos. Mozart disliked rhyme. All three librettos, she says, also show a detailed knowledge of the Italian literary tradition and a familiarity with Italian colloquial speech, two things that Da Ponte had and Mozart didn't. To her, this indicates that Da Ponte was holding his own pen.

But the question of who controlled the libretto doesn't really have to do with rhymes or ensembles. It has to do with soul. The Mozart/Da Ponte operas changed opera buffa. Before them, the form was much closer to the Roman comedies from which it descended, with their stock characters (old fool, wily servant) and their knockabout plots. In the Mozart/Da Ponte operas, the characters grew more complicated, the transactions between them serious and poignant as well as funny. Comedy became tragicomedy. There is abundant evidence, both in Mozart's music and in his life, that he had a deep understanding of the human heart, and a tragic bent. For Da Ponte, there is no such evidence, least of all in his picaresque memoir. Hence, Steptoe says—and he speaks for many—little responsibility for the profundity of the Mozart/Da Ponte operas can be attributed to the librettist.



The final proof is supposedly "Così Fan Tutte," with its tale of two friends, in disguise, wooing each other's fiancées to test their fidelity and watching the women as they fail the test. This story, we are told, was too nasty for Mozart to have had any hand in it. It was Da Ponte's, the scholars say. As everyone agrees, however, the libretto contains one very important non-satirical element. The two pairs of switched lovers are different from each other. Dorabella capitulates quickly and gladly to Guglielmo. But Fiordiligi is tortured by her new love for Ferrando. She suffers and delays. In her aria "Per pietà," the high point of the opera, she begs the absent Guglielmo's forgiveness for what she knows is going to be her betrayal of him. "You deserved better," she sings. Actually, he didn't—he's having a fine time with Dorabella—but that irony only makes her grief more moving.

This wrenching business is generally attributed to Mozart, because he gave it such lovely music. When Mozart got to Fiordiligi and Ferrando, the theory goes, he couldn't stand Da Ponte's low, cackling libretto anymore, and soared off in his own, idealistic direction. In the words of Joseph Kerman's "Opera As Drama," Mozart's score is a "joke on Da Ponte." The joke ripped the opera apart, leaving the shallow librettist on one side and the greathearted composer on the other. Still, Kerman says, "it was worth it."

There are some problems with this argument. If, in the earlier operas, Mozart is seen constantly guiding Da Ponte's pen, why, in "Così," is he suddenly absolved of any responsibility for the main thrust of the libretto? Also, what is the likelihood that Da Ponte, who created the wonderful contrasts among different pairs of lovers in "Figaro" and "Don Giovanni," did not engineer the contrast between Dorabella/Guglielmo and Fiordiligi/Ferrando? As for Fiordiligi's struggle, are we supposed to think that the lyrics of "Per pietà," so beauti-

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Beaver Creek.
Not exactly roughing it.

ful and sad, were written by Mozart? And who is the person who slyly scored them for horns, meaning cuckolding? Was that Da Ponte?

Finally, the efforts to separate Da Ponte from Mozart fail to take into account that if one likes or doesn't like an opera the libretto will have had a great deal to do with that. No one thinks that the libretto is as important as the music. Nevertheless, the libretto provides the story, and the words. The music is hung on them, and when they falter the opera will suffer. If scholars cannot decide how much credit to give to the librettist, that is a problem built into any collaborative production. Typically, after it is finished, each collaborator, or his admirers, will claim that the parts that worked were his, whereas the truth may be that what worked was indeed achieved collaboratively: that the participants spurred each other on. Sheila Hodges, who, alone among Da Ponte's recent biographers, seems to have read the librettos he wrote for composers other than Mozart, says that he did his best work with the best composers, and they with him. No surprise here.

In late-eighteenth-century opera, because advancement depended so heavily on patronage, the backstage was normally a snake pit. Mozart, in his letters, complained repeatedly that Salieri was trying to sabotage his work, and he was right. Salieri came to hate Da Ponte, too. They were competitors for power in the Burgtheater, as were their respective mistresses, both leading singers in the house. But Salieri was not alone. Da Ponte was an arrogant man—reportedly, he stood with his chest thrust so far forward that he had to put his cane behind his back and lean on it so as not to fall over. Many powerful people at the theatre wanted him gone, and they soon saw their chance. In 1790, a month after the première of "Così," Joseph II, who loved Da Ponte, died. He was succeeded by his brother, Leopold II, in whose ears Da Ponte's enemies began pouring tales of his misdeeds. Soon Da Ponte was dismissed from his post, and the police ordered him to leave Vienna. "Sacrificed to hatred, envy, the profit of scoundrels!" he exclaims in his memoirs. "Driven from a city wherein I had dwelt eleven years on the honorable earnings of my talent!" He says he considered suicide.

At this point, his life broke in two. The expulsion from Vienna marked the end of his career as a rascal, for soon afterward, in Trieste, he got married. The woman he chose, Ann Celestine Grahl, known as Nancy, was the daughter of a successful merchant and moneylender. She was beautiful, sweet-natured, learned, and in her twenties. Why she decided to join her fate to that of a penniless man twenty years her senior, and why her parents let her, is one of the abiding enigmas of the Da Ponte story. There was no difficulty about his Jewish origins—Nancy, too, was a Jewish convert to Christianity—but there should have been a problem about the fact that he was a Roman Catholic priest. Some writers have wondered whether he and Nancy did in fact get married. Nevertheless, she became his, and from then on there were no more knife-wielding mistresses.

More important, the departure from Vienna marked the end of his career as an artist of note. In 1792, he and Nancy settled in London, and Da Ponte soon became the "poet" to the Italian opera company at the King's Theatre—a job that required even more hackwork than the Burgtheater post. After about six years, he was fired, perhaps to his relief. He decided to go into business, first as a publisher, then as a seller of Italian books. There was also some sort of piano shop. All these enterprises foundered. Never was there a man with less of a business head than Da Ponte. Any person seeking to unload shoddy goods, anyone looking to form a partnership and then abscond with the funds, invariably found his way to Da Ponte's door, and received a warm welcome. He also regularly co-signed loans for known scoundrels. In one three-month period, he was arrested thirty times.

What Nancy thought of all this we never find out in Da Ponte's memoir. After he marries her, he barely mentions her, or the five children she bore him. His subject is himself, or, rather, his career. Da Ponte wrote his memoir when he was in his seventies and eighties—a still energetic but indignant old man who was convinced that people jealous of him had robbed him of what should have been his great triumphs. In his account of his early career, there are enough triumphs to keep the rancor in the background. Once the successes pass, however, the need for self-justification moves forward, and we hear a great deal about the villains who beset him—"men who made their way into my compassionate heart with the usual weapons of the hypocrite and the fawner and then ended their jest in the cry: 'Death to him! Death to him!' spitting in my face the blood they had sucked with cunning from my veins!" Whenever any of his malefactors comes to a bad end, he reports this with satisfaction. One man who cheated him was struck by lightning, and died on the spot. Such material is funny at first, but eventually it becomes sad, then tiresome. People should read his memoir, but only the first half.

Eventually, Da Ponte did what Europeans at risk for debtor's prison tended to do at that time: he emigrated to America. The year was 1805. Thomas Jefferson had just begun his second term as President.

It is strange to think that the man who wrote Mozart's librettos spent most of the latter half of his adult life in New York: that he ran a boarding school on Greenwich Street, a bookstore on lower Broadway, and also, soon after his arrival, a grocery store. (Imagine, he asks us, "how I must have laughed at myself every time my poet's hand was called upon to weigh out two ounces of tea, or measure half a yard of 'pigtail' "—chewing tobacco—"now to a cobbler, now to a teamster.") Later, he sold medicines and drygoods, and set up a distillery. None of these businesses prospered. At one point, the creditors made off with the family's beds.

But Da Ponte was never without hope, nor did he ever lose his talent for impressing powerful people. One day, two years after he landed in New York, he fell into conversation in a bookstore with a young man who, in the course of their talk, was unwise enough to disparage Italian literature. In response, Da Ponte delivered what was no doubt a long oration on the glories of Italian poetry, and finished with a suggestion that he himself was available to teach on that subject. The young man was Clement Clarke Moore, who later became a distinguished scholar—also the author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (" 'Twas the night before Christmas")—and whose father, Benjamin Moore, was the Episcopal Bishop of New York and the president of Columbia College. Three days after their conversation, Da Ponte began teaching Italian literature, at Bishop Moore's house. Dazzled by his erudition, the Moores arranged for him to meet what there was of learned society in New York. Arthur Livingston, in his introduction to Da Ponte's memoir, imagines the scene: "Had Mr. de Ponty—that was the name?—had Mr. de Ponty read Metastasio? Had he read Metastasio, indeed! Mr. Da Ponte had known Metastasio personally! Why, one evening in Vienna . . ." In time, thanks to Bishop Moore, Da Ponte became the first professor of Italian at Columbia College (in fact, the first in the United States)—and also, unbeknownst to that institution, the first Jew on its faculty.

His teaching career was intermittent, however. Young men in America were interested not in Italian but in French or Spanish, which could help them in business. Da Ponte's course at Columbia was not made part of the required curriculum—nor was it salaried—and very few students showed up. After a year, he suspended his classes there. Nevertheless, his contribution to the spread of Italian literature in America was substantial. Eventually, he opened an Italian bookshop. As he acknowledges, hardly anybody ever came into his store. He spent his time there writing his memoir and looking at the girls going into the pastry shop next door. But, through his book business, he supplied Columbia's library and the Library of Congress with most of their early holdings in Italian. His dream was to establish in New York a public library devoted exclusively to Italian literature. He nagged his influential friends about this, but he could never get enough support. He pestered them about other things as well. Could they loan him two hundred dollars? Could they write a letter to the newspapers defending him against slanders by his enemies? And why couldn't Columbia make Italian a required course? In response to the last request, Clement Moore wrote back advising him not to "aspire to acquire for yourself alone the whole glory of the universe." Justified though it may have been, one is sorry to read this letter, from the son of a bishop to the son of a tanner.

As great as Da Ponte's services to Italian literature was his work on behalf of opera. In the eighteen-twenties, the only permanent opera company in the United States was in New Orleans. Therefore, when it was announced, in 1825, that an Italian opera troupe assembled by Manuel García, a celebrated tenor, was coming to New York, there was considerable excitement, above all in the Da Ponte house. It is said that when the company arrived, and Da Ponte and García met, García broke into the "champagne aria" from "Don Giovanni." Da Ponte joined in, and the two men danced around the room in each other's arms. Da Ponte made everyone he knew buy tickets, and he persuaded García, who had brought mostly Rossini operas, to add "Don Giovanni" to the schedule.

America thus saw its first performance of a Mozart/Da Ponte opera. One writer, Christopher Lazare, tries to picture the opening night: "Da Ponte, surrounded by his pupils, looked on from a box and acknowledged the audience's applause, thinking whatever thoughts occur to a man of seventy-seven who hears his youth and his success singing to him across a lifetime of failure." He had probably not heard "Don Giovanni" in close to forty years. Soon he himself brought to New York another Italian opera company, directed by the French tenor Giacomo Montresor. At the same time, he led a campaign to construct a permanent home for opera in New York, and in 1833 the Italian Opera House, the first purpose-built opera theatre in the United States, opened, at the corner of Church and Leonard Streets. It was apparently a thing of wonder, all damask and silk, with the Muses smiling down from the dome.

In these projects, Da Ponte fared as he did in any other business venture. Whatever its artistic success, the Montresor season was a disaster financially. As for the Italian Opera House, it lasted only three years. Americans did not take naturally to opera. Some thought it snobbish, but many simply found it strange. Why did a play have to be *sung*—and in a foreign language, so that one couldn't get the jokes or understand why this man was running that one through with his sword? In Europe, opera was supported by the courts and the aristocracy—it was part of their lives, and their self-respect—and it was patronized by a multilingual audience that had grown up on lyric theatre and knew the stories the operas told. Americans were different. Furthermore, they were businessmen, and they expected any commercial enterprise to pay for itself. Of course, opera has never paid for itself, but it took Americans a long time to like it enough to want to cover its debts. Before that happened, many financial failures had to occur, and it is to Da Ponte's credit that he suffered them.

He complained, of course, and not just about the indifference to opera but about the neglect of Lorenzo Da Ponte. "I, the creator of the Italian language in America," he wrote to a friend in Italy in 1835. "I, the poet of Joseph II, the author of thirty-six dramas, the inspiration of . . . Mozart! After twenty-seven years of hard labor, I have no longer a pupil! Nearly ninety years old, I have no more bread in America!" He had bread. After Nancy died, of pneumonia, in 1831, one of his sons took him in. He remained strikingly handsome into his eighties, and he outlived not only his wife but also both his brothers and two of his children. Despite his laments, he probably passed his final years quite pleasantly, feuding with his enemies and writing a final volume of his memoir. It was never published. His biographers have speculated that it was probably full of denunciations and that after his death his family threw out the manuscript, so as not to let him embarrass himself.

Rodney Bolt's "The Librettist of Venice" is a vivid book, and that is its virtue and its vice. Bolt does considerable novelizing, together with some bodice-ripping ("Crippled by love for Angela, Lorenzo became . . . slave to her fire-eyed rages"). In the service of color, he tends to accept the fantastic stories that Da Ponte tells us in his memoir. When he gets to Matilda and her casket of diamonds, he says in a faraway endnote that some scholars have doubted this tale, but in his main text he narrates it enthusiastically. At points, his book is as picaresque as Da Ponte's. On the other hand, Bolt has a broad culture and is good at providing context. There are nice chunks of background on eighteenth-century artistic freelancing (in which both Da Ponte and Mozart were pioneers), on opera seria and buffa, and other essential matters. "The Librettist of Venice" is a tensionless book, but it is readable and fun.

Anthony Holden, the author of "The Man Who Wrote Mozart," has produced more than a dozen books, on Shakespeare, Tchaikovsky, the Princess of Wales, and others. In other words, he works fast. He certainly worked fast on Da Ponte. He makes careless mistakes. And if Bolt banished the scholars' doubts about Matilda to the endnotes, Holden has no endnotes. In his book, Matilda and other improbabilities are altogether unquestioned. Likewise, if there is a touch of vulgarity in Bolt's account, in Holden's there is more than a touch. Of the revelations concerning Da Ponte's affair with Angioletta Bellaudi, he writes, "The full details were considered so salacious that some were left smoldering in the recesses of the vast city archive [of Venice] where they lurk to this day." Nor will they be released from their lurking and smoldering by Holden, who appears to have done little research.

Anyone who wants to read a biography of Da Ponte should get Sheila Hodges's book. She did research. When fireworks go off in Ceneda on the day of Da Ponte's conversion, she knows who designed them; when he says he got back to Angiola's house late one night because the lagoons were frozen, she knows whether the lagoons froze that winter. (They didn't.) These are small matters, but Hodges's mastery of the material gives her the confidence to generalize and theorize about larger matters. Her book is also handsomely written. Finally, she likes Da Ponte. She acknowledges that he was probably, at times, a terrible bore, not to speak of a burden to his family. Nevertheless, she considers him a good man and a brilliant librettist, and when he does foolish things she finds reasons.

Da Ponte died quietly in 1838, at the age of eighty-nine. Hodges thinks that while he would have rejoiced to know that the operas he wrote with Mozart have not been forgotten, he felt that his contribution in importing Italian culture to America was even more important. She stresses his vast erudition and what was apparently his genius as a teacher. On this subject, she quotes one of his earliest biographers, Angelo Marchesan, who, like Da Ponte, was a professor of humanities at the seminary in Treviso:

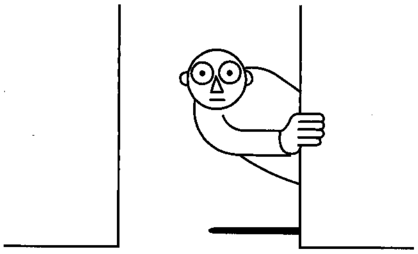
> All their lives his young pupils remembered their teacher, who not only fired them with the joy of studying literature but showed them such genuine affection and influenced them so greatly through his teaching, by this very influence making the tedium of the seminary walls seem less oppressive and the schoolroom benches less hard—so that, even more than would otherwise have been the case, in their childhood they felt the need of laughter, of sunshine, and of the urge to exercise their brains and their limbs without restraint.

This picture of the laughing boys with the stone walls around them—joy banked in sorrow—seems to speak not just of the young seminarians but also of Da Ponte. It sounds like something out of a Mozart opera. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Arlington Park, *by Rachel Cusk (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $23).* Cusk's sixth novel portrays the lives of contemporary middle- and upper-middle-class English mothers living in a placid, prestigious London suburb "where women drank coffee all day and pushed prams around the grey, orderly streets." Its residents include a successful recruiter turned obsessive homemaker, a woman who married up and feels the constant "presence of the enormous darkness from which she had come," and a frustrated city transplant who blames her parents for her aimlessness and tells her daughters that they are ruining her life. Unfortunately, Cusk can't decide whether she wants to satirize these women or swaddle them in viscous, Woolfian prose, for which she has a definite talent. Though the novel contains many striking descriptions, the tone is often shrill, and the characters are too transparent to be sympathetic.

Everything Preserved, *by Landis Everson (Graywolf; $15).* This remarkable début collection has an unusual silence at its heart. The first nine poems were written between 1955 and 1960, when Everson was a member of the Berkeley Renaissance; after that, he gave up writing poetry. The sixty-six others were written in a late outpouring from 2003 to 2005. Confident that "time loves the unity of our separate bones," the poems are purposeful and unpredictable. "Sacrifice" ends with a list of questions. No. 7: "Would you sign your name to this poem?" The earlier poems, in which filigree images decorate tense, often melancholy content, perhaps go some way toward explaining the long hiatus. These are poems of a talented but anxious youth who ultimately chooses to arm himself with silence—"I don't like people knowing what I'm thinking."



George Gershwin, *by Howard Pollack (California; $39.95).* Pollack's compendious though sometimes leaden biography comprises two sections, "Life" and "Work." The first demolishes the myths of Gershwin's homosexuality (in fact, he was quite a ladies' man) and his lack of classical technique (Henry Cowell, one of his many distinguished teachers, marvelled at his facility), and offers jewel-like images of the protean composer burning off his joyful excess energy; Kay Swift recalls his penchant for tap-dancing while waiting for an elevator. The much larger "Work" section includes a surfeit of detail on such matters as what the critic of the Wilmington *Morning News* thought of "A Dangerous Maid," but Pollack redeems himself with big, glorious chapters on masterworks like "Rhapsody in Blue" and "Porgy and Bess." Despite Gershwin's popularity, his musical legacy remains oddly unstable, and Pollack's broad approach allows for a vigorous counterpoint of affirming and dissenting voices.

Portrait, *by William S. McFeely (Norton; $26.95).* In this keenly observed biography of Thomas Eakins, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Grant" reads in the pained, dignified faces of Eakins's subjects the painter's own "defiant" psychology. Eakins, McFeely argues, was the last of the nineteenth century's "great seekers," in the company of Whitman, Thoreau, and Melville. His early, "alarmingly American" tableaux express a yearning for a world "beyond comfort and progress." But a series of personal crises—chief among them dismissal from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, officially for ripping a loincloth from a model, but more likely for rumored homosexuality—gradually led Eakins to an awareness that his message of personal freedom would not be embraced by the society he loved. In later works, like the 1898 "Salutat," a boxer's body, "pale almost to a silver gray," contrasts with the golden, naked bodies of the 1885 "Swimming." McFeely writes, "Instead of innocence regained, there is a sense of its irretrievable loss."

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STONE OPERA

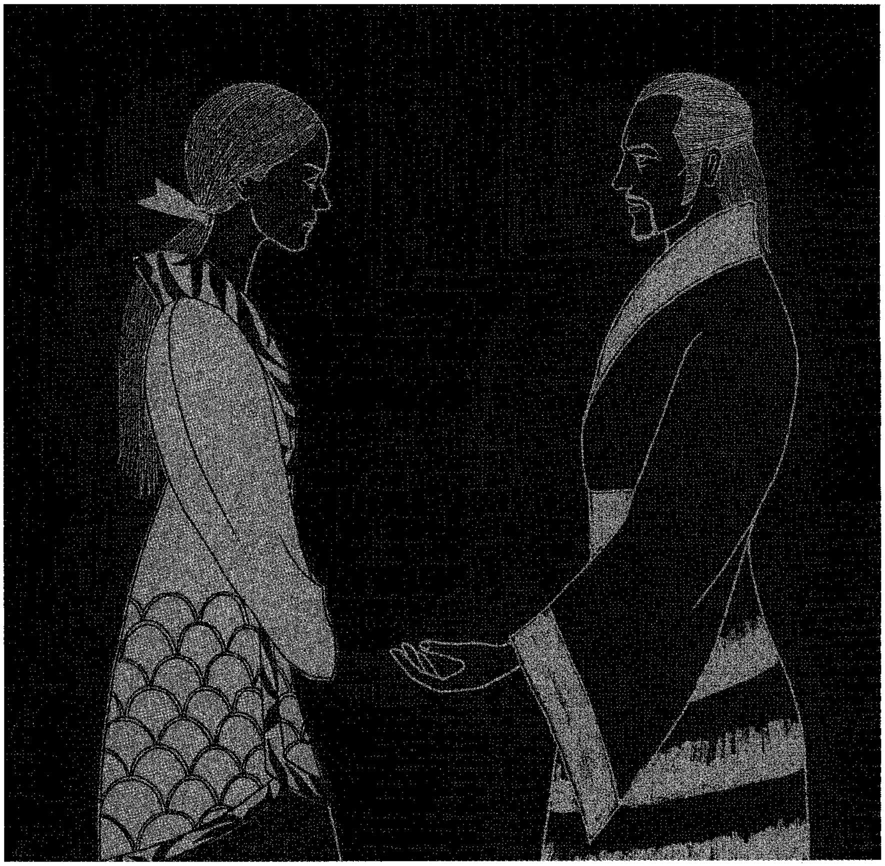
Tan Dun's "The First Emperor" at the Met.

BY ALEX ROSS

Scenes of the Near and Far East have unfolded thousands of times on the Metropolitan Opera stage, courtesy of "Madama Butterfly," "Turandot," "Aida," and other masterpieces of Orientalism. This season, with the première performances of Tan Dun's "The First Emperor," the company is finally letting a non-Western composer describe his world. Tan grew up in a village in the Hunan province of China, during the Cultural Revolution. He knew nothing of Western music until his late teens, receiving a musical education from rural folk songs, the chanting of Taoist monks, and Peking opera, whose techniques he absorbed while playing fiddle in a provincial troupe. He came to New York in 1986, having been introduced to Schoenberg and other twentieth-century composers at the Central Conservatory, in Beijing. He rapidly established himself as the most energetic Chinese composer of his generation. His first opera, "Nine Songs," had its première at Pace University, in 1989; his second, "Marco Polo," played at New York City Opera, in 1997. Now he is conducting his latest opera at the Met—the first composer to do so since Italo Montemezzi led "L'Amore dei Tre Re," in 1941.

There's no telling what you're going to get when you sit down to listen to one of Tan's works. A composer of unruly imagination, he has zigzagged from harsh avant-garde noises—John Cage has long been his prime musical hero—to pop-Chinese ditties of bewildering bathos. Often, both extremes are present in a single work: parts of Tan's "Heaven, Earth, Mankind (Symphony 1997)," commissioned to celebrate the return of Hong Kong to China, would fit snugly onto the soundtrack of a one-world airline commercial, while sections juxtaposing a solo cello with the ancient sound of *bianzhong* bells create an atmosphere of entrancing mystery. When his fusions take hold, as in "Nine Songs" and "Water Passion After Saint Matthew," they seem to reveal some subatomic link among the world's musical cultures. When they fail, they fail spectacularly, creating radical new forms of musical kitsch. Unfortunately, "The First Emperor" falls largely into the latter category.

The project is commendably ambitious: it delves deep into Chinese history while addressing the very modern problem of art's relationship with power. The libretto, by the expatriate novelist Ha Jin and the composer, is set in the third century B.C., during the reign of Qin Shihuang. Qin is unifying China, standardizing the culture, and initiating the construction of the Great Wall. But, the opera reminds us, he is also slaughtering thousands and destroying whatever traditions do not fit his purposes. Pitted against him is the musician Gao Jianli, who, in a heavily embroidered version of the historical record (one inspired by the 1996 film "The Emperor's Shadow"), is presented as a childhood friend of the Emperor and as the lover of his daughter, Yueyang. Qin persuades Jianli to compose a great anthem in celebration of his regime. But, after Yueyang commits suicide, Jianli bites off his own tongue, and leaves behind an anti-patriotic chorus of lamentation. The story has obvious echoes of the Cultural Revolution. When Qin condemns ancient Chinese music and calls for a more modern style that will "touch the heart," he could be quoting from the sayings of Madame Mao.



Elizabeth Futral as Princess Yueyang and Plácido Domingo as the Emperor.

HIROSHI TANABE

The opera begins in sensational fashion, with a dynamic ritual of sacrifice. A Peking opera singer invokes the forces of yin and yang in a wailing chant. The chorus shouts, claps, slaps, and stomps. A *zheng*, or twenty-one-string zither, is savagely strummed; ceramic pots are struck with sticks. A variously blaring, trilling, rustling, and rumbling mass of sound rises up from the orchestra.

Across the front of the stage, twelve drummers beat on drums with stones and knock the stones together. It adds up to a strictly organized thunder—and perhaps the most far-out music that has ever been heard at the Met.

The excitement dissipates when Qin walks on, demanding tunefulness in place of raw tradition. The musical language turns prosaic, clichéd, pseudo-Romantic. A few faintly catchy melodic formulas are worked to death. Long stretches of conversation are set to nondescript, tootling music of the kind that plays in movies when naughty pets or children are on the loose. It's as if Tan himself had caved in to his hero-villain's constricted aesthetic. In the more ceremonial scenes, there are painfully obvious borrowings from the chantlike melodies and modal harmonies of Olivier Messiaen. Several times, I found myself daydreaming about how thrilling it would be to hear Messiaen's "Saint Francis" finally performed at the Met—not the ideal mental digression during a world première. The interval of the tritone (think Leonard Bernstein's "Maria" without the final syllable) is grossly abused. The setting of the English language—only the very opening and a few subsequent passages are in Chinese—borders on inept.

The score is not without arresting ideas. The scene in which Yueyang and Gao Jianli fall in love unfolds over an eerie ostinato of Tibetan singing bowls and waterphones (instruments using water as a resonating body). The slaves who are building the Great Wall sing a plaintive lament, which Gao Jianli appropriates as his anthem of revenge. The final sequence, in which the Yin-Yang Master shows the Emperor the consequences of his brutal rule, restores the awesome ritualism of the opening, now augmented with ominous strokes on a giant bell. But such episodes are too sparsely scattered over a three-hour score to make good on the opera's promise.

The Met has worked hard to bring "The First Emperor" to life, but the production, too, seems misconceived. It is the work of the film director Zhang Yimou, who created "Raise the Red Lantern," "House of Flying Daggers," and "Hero," among other contemporary Chinese classics. The monumental set, by Fan Yue, consists largely of a rising staircase that fills almost the entire stage; the Great Wall is represented by blocks that hang from wires. The illustrious Japanese costume designer Emi Wada brightens the forbidding mood with explosions of color, emphasizing red, gold, green, and purple. The scheme of mixing austere décor with vivid costumes recalls Anthony Minghella's version of "Madama Butterfly," which opened the Met season, in September—except that Minghella's stage pictures had far more poetry and pleasure in them. Perhaps Zhang wanted a static, oppressive atmosphere, in keeping with the Mao-ish subtext of the story, but, if so, the point is driven home with excessive force.

On opening night, Plácido Domingo, performing a new opera for the first time in his nearly forty-year career at the Met, sang the title role in strong, untiring voice. But to have a Spanish tenor pretending to be Chinese while singing awkwardly in English stretched plausibility to the breaking point. Elizabeth Futral gave coquettish sparkle and vocal brilliance to the role of Yueyang; the musically intelligent Paul Groves struggled to inject life into the blandly written role of Gao Jianli; Michelle DeYoung, as the Shaman, gamely stretched and twisted her voice in Chinese style; Hao Jiang Tian and Susanne Mentzer could do little with the undercooked roles of General Wang and Yueyang's mother, respectively. By far the most confident of the performers was the Peking opera star Wu Hsing-Kuo, who portrayed the Yin-Yang Master; he was a joy to watch, his face communicating shades of pain, regret, fleeting joy, and wry wit that were barely indicated in the score.

"The First Emperor" has page after page of heavy-duty choral writing, and the Met chorus handled it all heroically, sustaining a long line in the lyric passages and enthusiastically executing the experimental vocal techniques that Tan sometimes requested. The composer proved to be an authoritative conductor; he has a knack for coördinating diverse forces and imposing an even musical flow. But to what end? In his quest for a grandiose East-West synthesis, this gifted composer has hit an impasse, and he needs to return to the sources that first fired his imagination. ♦

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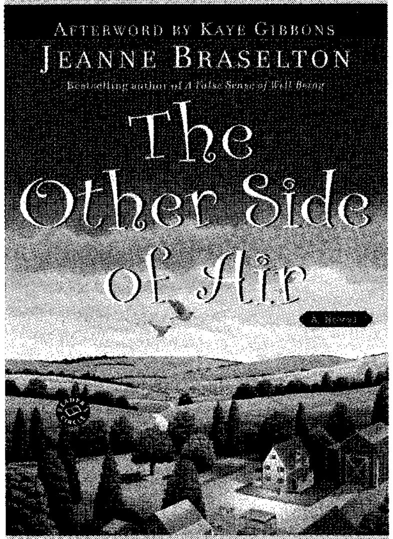
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INTELLIGENTSIA

Tom Stoppard on Russia's renegade thinkers.

BY HILTON ALS

History as distinct from destiny: that is what the Czech-born playwright Tom Stoppard shows us near the start of "Voyage," the first play of "The Coast of Utopia," his alternately reckless, romantic, boring, and exhilarating trilogy on the Russian thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century (at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont). Here, at Premukhino, an estate some hundred and fifty miles northwest of Moscow, in the years from 1833 to 1844, the Russian nobleman Alexander Bakunin (Richard Easton) lives with his wife, Varvara (Amy Irving), and their four daughters and one son, Michael (Ethan Hawke), in a kind of unrivalled splendor: with miles and miles of grounds and hours and hours in which to discuss any number of topics that concern the family, or his idea of it. Educated abroad and never obliged to work for a living, Alexander is a true aristocrat, with all that that life entails: a love of beauty, and little firsthand knowledge of the cruelty that can thwart it. As his son wrote to him some years later, "You were our teacher. You awakened in us a feeling for the good and the beautiful; a love of nature and that love which still closely and indissolubly unites all of us brothers and sisters."

Notice that Michael doesn't include his mother in his declaration of love. As E.H. Carr points out, in his valuable 1937 biography of Bakunin, whom many consider the father of modern anarchism, Michael's political awareness seems to have been forged, in part, in opposition to Varvara's domestic despotism, to her propensity for putting her husband before her children's needs and for terrorizing the many serfs who served her. (We are meant to understand that people like Varvara, with their wanton sense of entitlement, were one of the reasons for the Russian Revolution.) Played frighteningly and well by Irving, Varvara emerges as a kind of gargoyle in a beribboned bonnet, as hard as the shine on her carefully polished samovar.

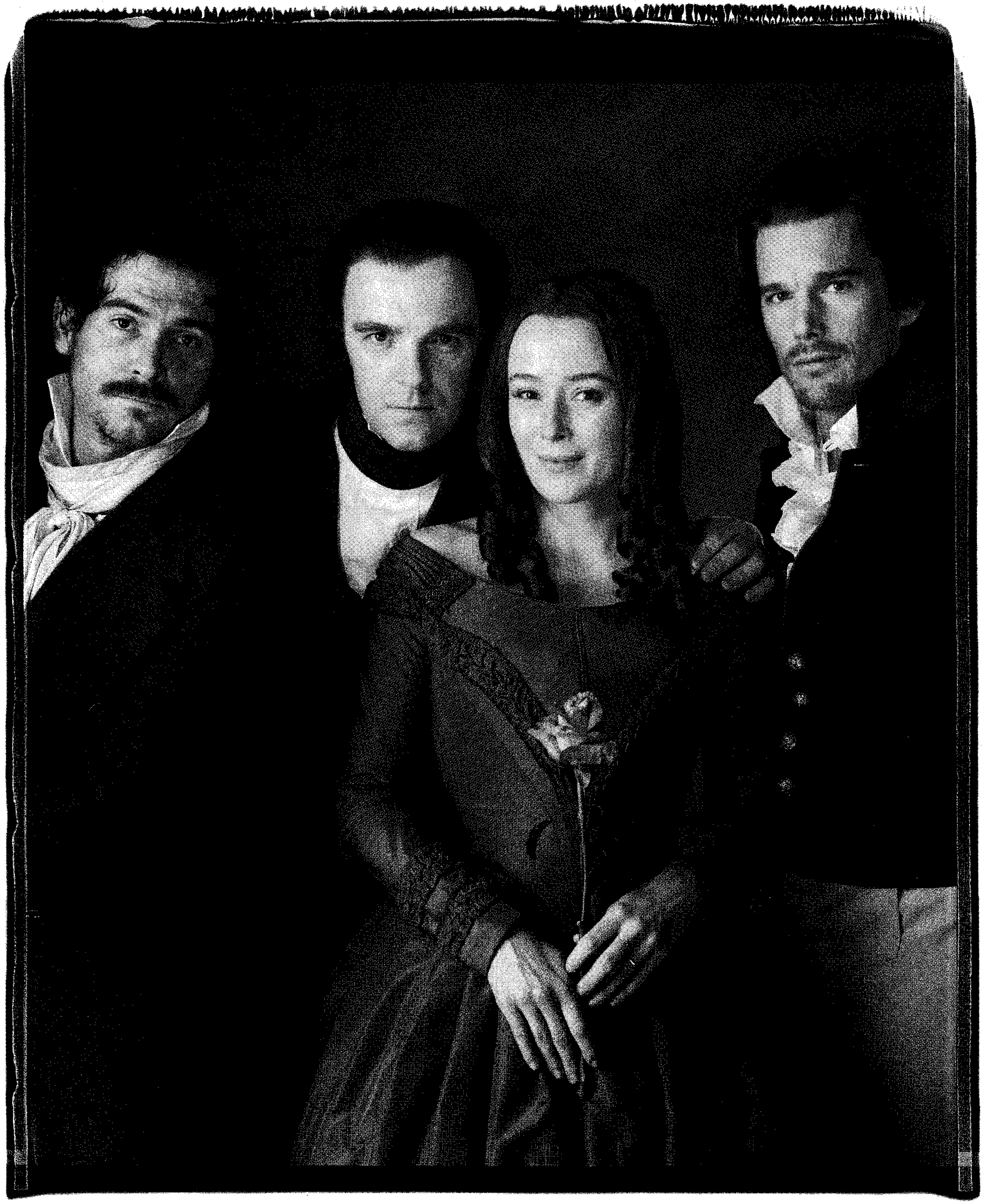
Of course, Varvara's vindictiveness is not reserved exclusively for the underclass: in her nasty game of shooting fish in a barrel, women come right behind serfs. After all, why would Varvara want to align herself with those weak creatures who threaten the most important thing she has: male approval—the only form of power accorded to women in this world whose end is just beginning. Alexander and Varvara's eldest daughter, Liubov (Jennifer Ehle, who is stupendous in the role), on the other hand, is intelligent, a reader and a writer, the soft counterpart to her brother's brashness and blind pronouncements. ("My God, I'm surrounded by egotists!" the egotistical Michael shouts near the close of "Voyage.") Liubov may be one of the reasons that Michael is a feminist—or as much of one as he can be, given the era and his sex.

At the same time, he is swept up by the latest rumors from Paris about something called the Romantic Revolution, which is emerging from the ashes of the French Revolution. What is this Romantic Revolution? Its message is that we must, by looking inward, question our relationship to society. We must poke and prod at our notion of authority and the ways in which it shapes our consciousness. For Michael Bakunin and his various friends, editors, students, and hangers-on, the Romantic Revolution becomes a kind of galvanizing force, energizing these rich kids to act. Not that Bakunin needed much of an excuse to be excited. As he wrote in his 1851 "Confession," a "radical defect in my nature" has always been "a love for the fantastic, for unusual, unheard-of adventures which open up vast horizons and the end of which cannot be foreseen." (The philosopher Isaiah Berlin criticized Bakunin's writings for this very lack of emotional discipline.)

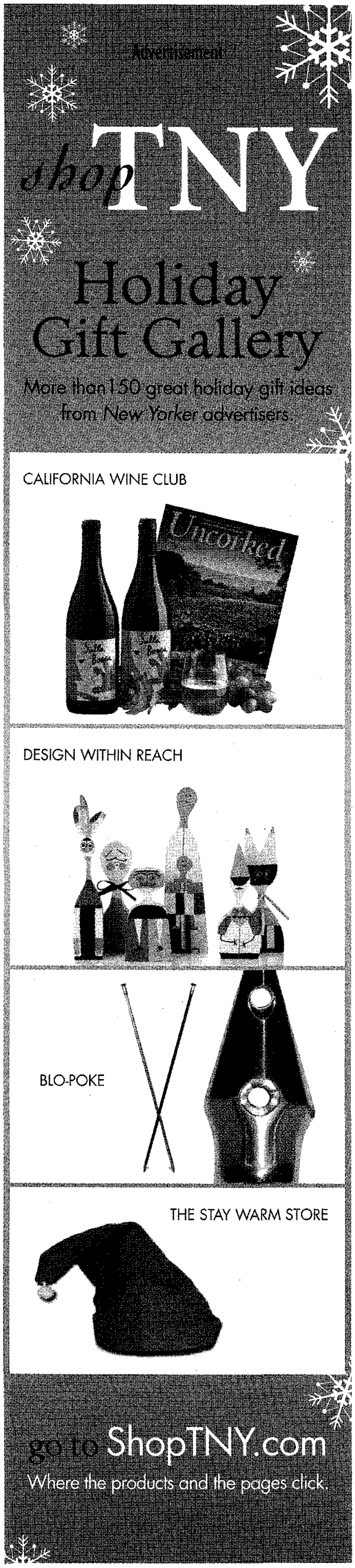
Bakunin could just as easily be describing Stoppard's adventures in playwriting. From his breakthrough hit, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" (1967), to his most recent, last year's "Rock 'n' Roll," Stoppard has applied unusual language to fantastical situations. Joyce shares a stage with Tristan Tzara. Two bit players in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" argue about duality, in dialogues composed of short lines that turn in on themselves, sinking into solipsism. Stoppard's characters do not live so much as imagine what life could be, if it adhered to their visions. His dramatizations take us on a guided tour of the life of the mind, with all its blind spots, loves, and delusions, as it is shaped by the uncontrollable forces of history.

Nevertheless, despite Stoppard's obvious brilliance "Voyage" begins to feel too much like a lesson in Act II, when the action moves to Moscow. (Stoppard has cited as influences in the creation of "The Coast of Utopia" Carr's 1931 "The Romantic Exiles," Edmund Wilson's 1940 "To the Finland Station," and Berlin's 1978 essay collection, "Russian Thinkers," among other works.) The characters are forced to present too many ideas that simply can't be performed, and the flurry of activity stalls. Jack O'Brien's powerful, sometimes breathtaking direction tries to counteract this tendency. He relies heavily on Hawke's performance to keep things moving and to synthesize Stoppard's thoughts, and, most of the time, Hawke more than meets the challenge. His Bakunin is all wide-eyed stares and impatience—he is dialectical materialism in action, puffing on cheroots and drinking wine as he complains about luxury as just another form of corruption. One can foresee, in his inability to listen or to finish a thought, his eventual bond and subsequent break with Marx. With his ruined dancer's physique—he's too fired up to be graceful—Hawke tells us that Stoppard's Bakunin, beneath his silk cravat, is one of the world's first hippies, a romantic child of privilege, dying to strike out into the glittering world of difference.

Like his educated compatriots, Bakunin finds Russia relatively unimportant in the scheme of things, a land of servants and idleness that is, as one of Stoppard's characters puts it, "neither



Billy Crudup, Brían F. O'Byrne, Jennifer Ehle, and Ethan Hawke, in "The Coast of Utopia." Photograph by Mary Ellen Mark.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East nor West." In a way, the political theorist Alexander Herzen (Brían F. O'Byrne), who stands at the center of "Shipwreck," the second part of the trilogy (the third, "Salvage," will open in February), personifies all that Bakunin is desperate to escape. The illegitimate son of a Russian nobleman with close ties to the Tsar, Herzen has more than enough money to pass his days, like Bakunin senior, in blissful denial. Unlike Michael's father, however, Herzen has lived a life marked by difficulty: his son was born deaf. Herzen and his wife, his first cousin Natalie (Jennifer Ehle, appropriately luscious and self-regarding here), hope for better medical attention for their child abroad, but they cannot move to Europe without government approval. While awaiting word, before their flight to Paris, in 1847, the Herzens spend the summer with the novelist Ivan Turgenev (Jason Butler Harner) and the poet Nicholas Ogarev (the funny Josh Hamilton), who argue about coffee, literature, and their relative insularity as guests of the rich. (Turgenev clearly doesn't mind the comfort as much as he claims to, since he soon joins the Herzens abroad.)

But, as it happens, Herzen suffers from a kind of discontent, too: as foreigners, he and his wife are considered outsiders among the Parisian rich and titled. Does that qualify them as artists or intellectuals? Natalie certainly thinks so. But, instead of writing or painting, she embarks on an affair that is meant to signal her French-style emancipation as a woman; the affair is, in fact, more historically significant to her than the overthrow of King Louis Philippe. Like Bakunin before them, the Herzens are dangerous romantics, meaning that the various causes they adopt, or drop, or eventually forget about—both personal and political—are dictated entirely by their reflexive emotional responses. They are socialists of a kind, but only because they can afford to be. They prefer an ideology that does not inconvenience them, and they understand the underclass about as much as their parents did, which is to say, not at all. Herzen wants to belong to the artistic and political ferment that is mid-nineteenth-century Paris, but he's too absorbed by the ridiculousness of life—the affairs, the subplots, the creature comforts. He is not blind to his destiny, but he is ignorant of history, and of his class's effect on it. The world of ideas is a parlor game for him, even as he orbits around "real" intellectuals such as the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky (the fine Billy Crudup), who was a part of Bakunin's life at Premukhino and now finds himself in Paris promoting the voice of Russia as it emerges from Turgenev and others. Unlike the Herzens, Belinsky has a true passion for the word. Can Turgenev rise to his challenge and provide the rest of the world with an accurate picture of their ever-changing homeland?

In "Shipwreck," Stoppard dissects the absurdism inherent in belief, and he does so in a voice that is significantly less preachy than the one he uses in "Voyage." His ambition here is as epic as Bakunin's, and suffused with a pathos that equals Herzen's. (To create such living, flawed men, Stoppard must have identified with them to some degree.) But, unlike his often foolish and always sincere characters, he possesses the discipline of a great artist, who knows that in dreams lie responsibilities: to build a world, one must first fashion the bricks. In addition to writing a work that reverberates in the imagination long after the curtain has come down—his connections are too quick to be entirely absorbed in a single viewing of either play—Stoppard has also fulfilled a dream that was born at Lincoln Center in 1963, when the director Elia Kazan and the producer Robert Whitehead united to form a repertory company there that they hoped would attain its "own voice and vocabulary." Kazan and Whitehead lasted less than two years; the company disbanded after ten. But Stoppard and O'Brien's remarkable ensemble brings that sense of dramatic purpose back to life. Without this kind of shared theatrical history, we would all be as lost as Stoppard's exiles, wondering what to say and how to say it. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

UNDER THE VOLCANO

"Children of Men" and "Pan's Labyrinth."

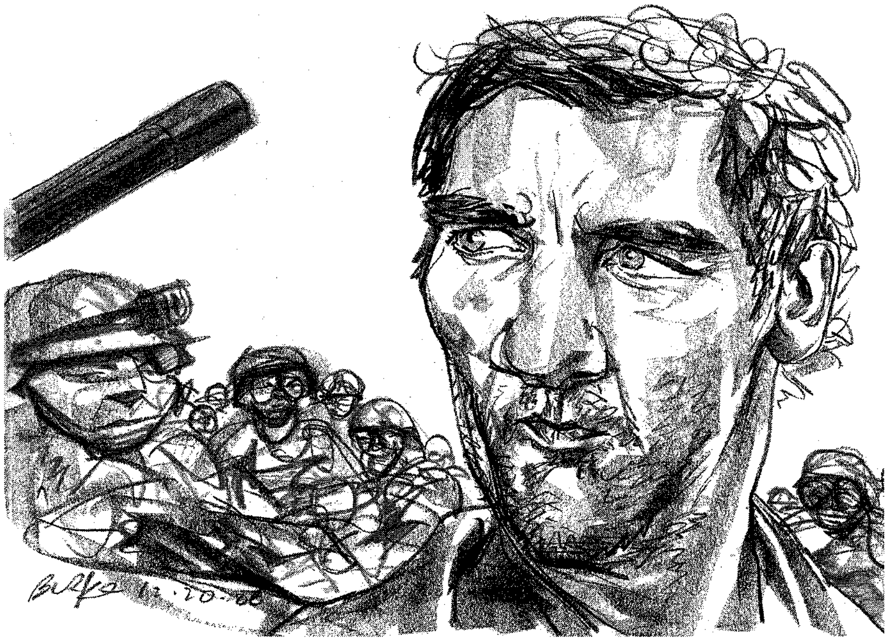
BY ANTHONY LANE

Something is afoot in Mexican film-making. That much is clear from three movies of the past year: "Babel," which came out in October, and now "Children of Men" and "Pan's Labyrinth," both of them released for the holiday. The first was directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, the second by Alfonso Cuarón, and the third by Guillermo del Toro (one of whose producers was Cuarón). Even if none of the films are to your taste, you cannot miss something forthright in their attitude—a willingness to entangle themselves in mystery and to flit across established borders, both of geography and of genre. All three directors have previously filmed in their native Mexico, bequeathing us works such as "Amores Perros," "Y Tu Mamá También," and "Cronos," but the urge to see the world, or to elaborate on the angle at which they see it, seems lately to have consumed them.

"Children of Men," based on the novel by P. D. James, takes place in Britain, in 2027. Cuarón is no stranger to the British backdrop, having made "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban," but the new film, eschewing magic, casts a more noisome spell. The land served up for us is a stew of anxiety and intolerance, seething with casual savagery and overlaid by a rancid sky. Some of the most enduring details are glanced at in passing: a yellowing gush from a waste pipe at the edge of a muddy field, or the projectiles that bystanders hurl at the caged windows of a train. On board is Theo (Clive Owen), once a political activist, now a deflated bureaucrat. In Owen's hangdog, half-snarling expression, we quickly sense a man who has had just about enough of life. The whole planet, in fact, has had enough: there is mass infertility, and the youngest person on earth, we learn from a news report on TV, has died. He was eighteen years old.

This is an extraordinary premise for a film—a childless world—and it will leave some viewers feeling restive and underinformed. How, they will want to know, did this catastrophe arise? To Cuarón, however, the first rule of storytelling is: Go with the given. Don't waste space on deep background, and don't delay the action with a preface—remember Ben Kingsley, intoning like a royal robot at the start of Steven Spielberg's "A.I."? Cuarón respects his audience, presuming that we are grown up enough (or ground down enough), to work out the horrors for ourselves. "Only Britain soldiers on," we hear in government announcements. Slowly we realize that they are trumpeting a siege mentality; immigrants are being rounded up and imprisoned, and to harbor them is a criminal act. (If this rings a bell among current worriers, so much the better.) We also see commercials for something called Quietus, but what is it? Mineral water? Migraine cure? Suddenly the truth snaps into place: it's a suicide drug. Hence the nasty taste of Hamlet in the brand name ("He himself might his quietus make/With a bare bodkin") and the chill of the advertising slogan: "You decide when." Nobody is being born, and everybody picks a time to die.

One day, Theo is bundled into a van and taken to meet not, as you expect, the secret police but an old girlfriend, Julian (Julianne Moore), who still tends the subversive flame. She and a gang of fellow-dissidents want Theo to use his contacts, personal or professional, to get hold of transit papers—the only guarantee of safe passage, these days—for a young woman named Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey). Transported to the countryside, Theo goes into a barn to meet Kee. Without warning, you see on his exhausted face a look of purest wonderment, for Kee is great with child. So *that's* why Universal chose to release the film on Christmas Day.



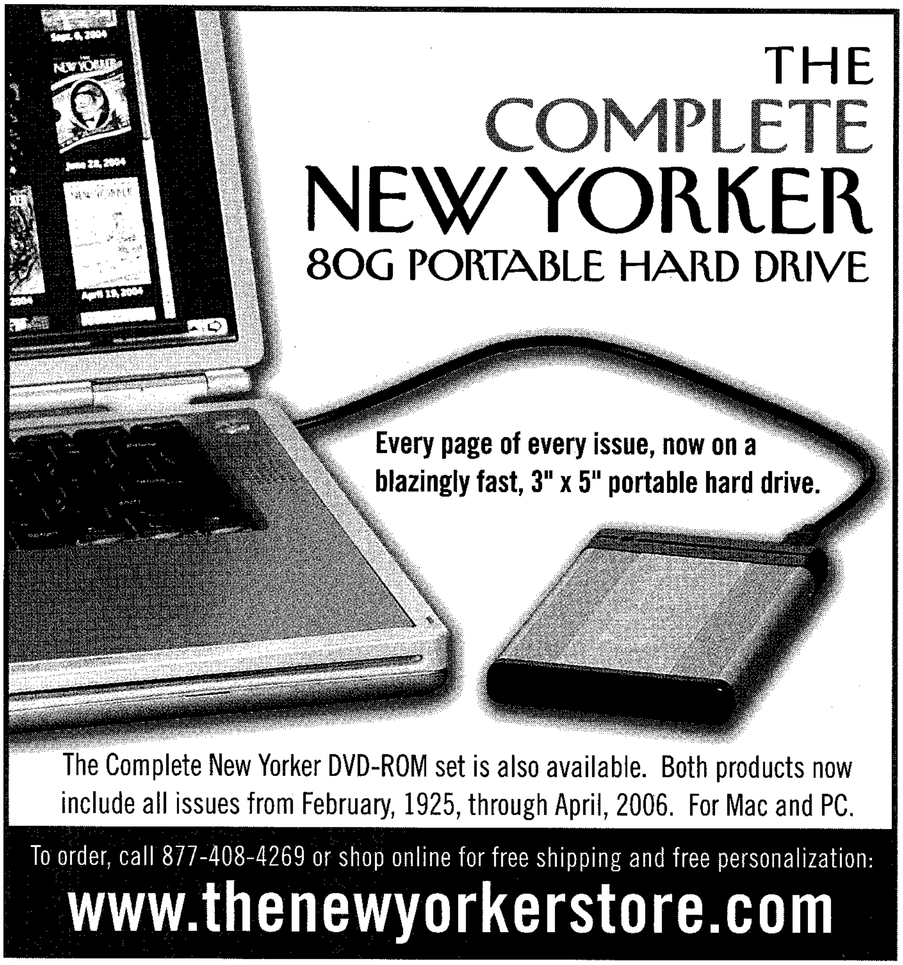
Clive Owen in Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation of a P. D. James novel.

PHILIP BURKE

The rest of "Children of Men" is a scruffy, panting escape flick, with Theo retrieving his sense of purpose and guiding the expectant mother to safety, offshore, away from the powers that be. Kee herself, of course, is the only power that is; without her, all that humanity can look forward to is one big bodkin. There is a relentless sequence, late in the movie, when the two of them are smuggled into an immigrants' camp on the south coast, from where they plan to pick up a boat. Within the camp, civilization has all but rotted away, and when the Army arrives to restore order we get a pitched battle between the feral and the near-fascist (what a choice), filmed with such unbroken urgency—there are blurred spots of blood on the lens—that you may want to duck under your seat and wait for the hell to subside. When it does so, the peace is immediate. Look up and you will see Kee, cradling the baby to whom she has just given birth, stepping calmly through ranks of armed men—disarmed, now, by the sight and the cry of something that no one has witnessed since the year 2009.

The idea of the world redeemed by a helpless infant is a specifically Christian one, but here it shines out from a landscape that is bitterly stripped of faith. The people I know who have seen "Children of Men" have admired its grip, but they had to be dragged to the theatre; it's a film that you need to see, not a film that you especially want to. I guess it should be logged as sci-fi, yet by 2027 mankind is clearly beyond the reach of science, and the roughened pace of the film—photographed by Emmanuel Lubezki—leans away from fiction and toward the natural stutter of reportage. When a bomb explodes in Tony Scott's "Déjà Vu," it is tensely prepared for and filmed with a lingering gloat; when a bomb explodes in "Children of Men," it bursts from nowhere on a dreary street. Even if you don't buy the main conceit, the scumbled texture of the movie makes it feel not just plausible but recognizable, and Cuarón takes care never to paint the future as consolingly different. Theo doesn't go to work in an aluminum-foil catsuit with a diagonal zip; he wears a jacket and tie. And where the cars of "Blade Runner" hovered in the ruined air, the vehicles here still trundle along on roads. The Britain of twenty years' time, in short, will be just like the Britain of today, but worse. The sole survivors—the only citizens not to have caved in to despair—are shaggy old-timers like Jasper (Michael Caine), a friend of Theo's who saw it coming. He lives in a forest hideaway, smokes weed, plays loud music, and still finds something to laugh about. Such is the moral of this tough, destabilizing film: the hippies were right all along.

Reversing the flow of time, we come to 1944 and the rustling backwoods of Spain. Here, as related by Guillermo del Toro in "Pan's Labyrinth," Franco's army is plucking out the remnants of the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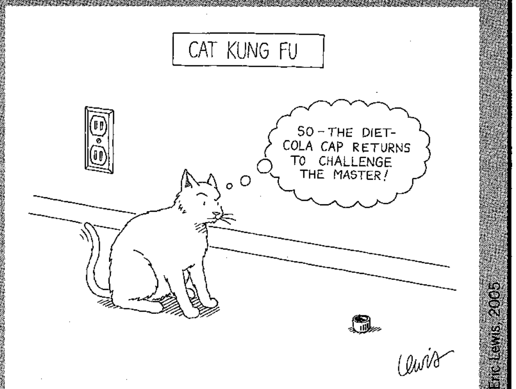
CAT KUNG FU
SO-THE DIET-COLA CAP RETURNS TO CHALLENGE THE MASTER!
Lewis
Eric Lewis, 2005

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opposition—republican diehards who dwell among the trees, emerging only to fight. We could be watching an update on the tales of Robin Hood, or a foreshadowing of Jasper in "Children of Men."

Into this remoteness comes Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), a girl of ten, who has travelled with her widowed mother, Carmen (Ariadna Gil), to meet her new stepfather. He is an immaculate sadist by the name of Captain Vidal (Sergi López), who commands the local military outpost, and who has ordered Carmen to join him; she is carrying their first child, who will be born, the Captain decrees, in the old house where he is quartered. Ofelia, not surprisingly, feels surplus to requirements, and she duly drifts off into the surrounding grounds, as though into sleep. Indeed, for much of the film we cannot tell whether Ofelia's adventures, like those of Alice in Wonderland, are rooted in the real or secreted by her own imaginings. We know she is a bookish creature, and what ensues has the rich scent of a fairy tale. Entering a stone labyrinth, she walks down spiral steps into a subterranean cavern and meets a faun (Doug Jones)—"very old, very tall, and smelling of earth," she says. He has the hooves of a shire horse and a pair of horns that could double as musical instruments. He bears about as much resemblance to Mr. Tumnus, his fellow-hybrid from the pages of C. S. Lewis, as the late Jack Palance bore to Woody Allen.

Like any self-respecting beast of legend, the faun sets our heroine three tasks. These entail crawling into the roots of trees, fitting keys to locks, letting fall drops of blood, and other staples of a Freudian adolescence. Ivana Baquero, her face both credulous and wise before its time, seems ideally poised between the childish and the adult, and that makes her a fine successor to Ana Torrent, whose youthful performances in "The Spirit of the Beehive" (1973) and "Raise Ravens" (1976) are indispensable to the cinema of modern Spain. Like those great films, "Pan's Labyrinth" needs a child at its heart, because it is partly about a nation striving to define itself, and confronted by a confusion of paths. To Captain Vidal, the way is clear: "I want my son to be born in a new, clean Spain," he says, in a declaration of Fascist fatherhood. The cleanliness continues as he tortures an enemy suspect, then washes the blood off in a shower of rain.

No wonder del Toro turns his camera downward, to the soil. The mud that Ofelia gets all over her best dress, in which she was meant to greet a party of adults, is a squelching badge of honor. One virtue of "Pan's Labyrinth" is its sound design, which discards any hint of the ethereal by turning up the volume on small, supercharged noises: the creak of the Captain's leather gloves as he flexes his fists, the nighttime complaints of floorboard and rafter, or Ofelia's teeth biting into a succulent grape. More haunting still is the howl of a mandrake root, "a plant that dreams of being human," in the words of the faun. Del Toro, as he proved in "The Devil's Backbone" (2001), is enthralled by such transformations: plant to human, man to beast, war to uneasy peace. He is helped by Sergi López, to whom the script offers little more than monstrosity but who somehow turns Vidal into the most mystifying presence of all; his resilience to pain, as shown when he stitches up a knife wound to his own mouth, is not so far from the courage required by Ofelia in her descent to the underworld.

The question is, do the two halves of the movie fit together? What does Vidal's attempt to suppress the freedom fighters have to do with fauns and giant toads? There is, thank heavens, no neat allegorical match. Take the long-fingered, hairless figure whom Ofelia finds in her nightmare, and who, as if in homage to Buñuel, screws his eyeballs into his palms and holds up his hands in order to see and pursue her. He does not represent a historical person, or embody a single threat; he simply conjures an atmosphere of cannibalistic fear, and thus feels gruesomely right for an age of schism and feud. The odd thing is that, for all this adhesive detail, del Toro lets the fantasy slip slightly from his grasp, preferring to focus on the brutalities of fact. By the end, the three tasks seem of limited consequence, whereas the fate of Vidal—and of the steel-willed housekeeper, Mercedes (Maribel Verdú), who has taken Ofelia to her bosom—tightens to a merciless climax. So smartly has del Toro thought his fable through, and so graceful is his grasp of visual rhyme, that to pick holes in it seems mean; yet "Pan's Labyrinth" is perhaps more dazzling than involving—I was too busy reading its runes and clues, as it were, to be swept away. It is, I suspect, a film to return to, like a country waiting to be explored: a maze of dead ends and new life. ♦

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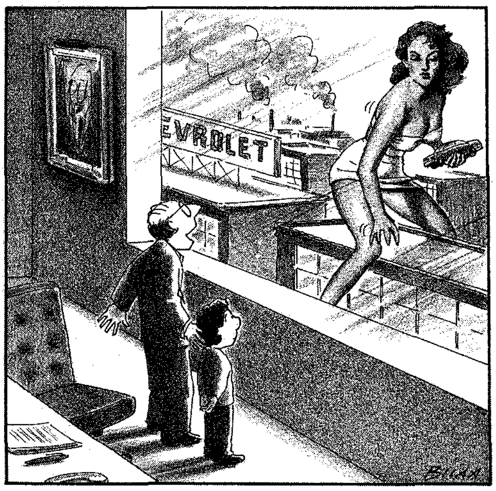
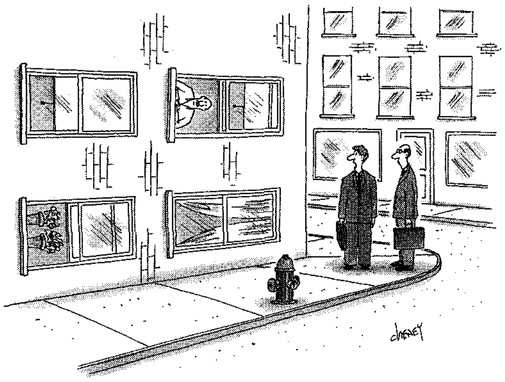
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, January 7th. Finalists in the December 18th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 22nd issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Son, one day all this will be yours. Except her.”
Michael Embley, Tiburon, Calif.



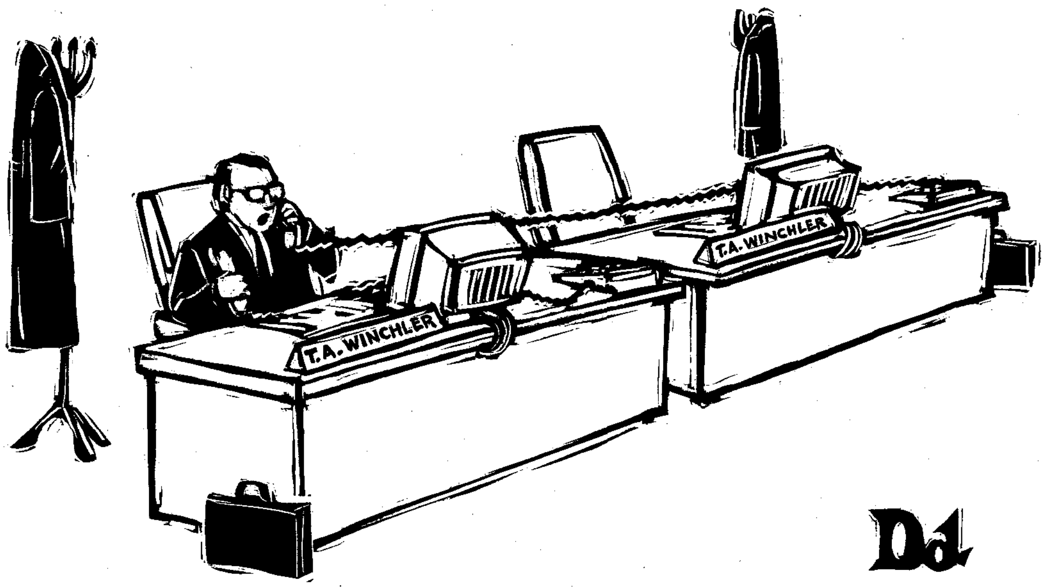
THE FINALISTS

“Looks like another side-rise is springing up.”
Margo DePhillips, Chicago, Ill.

“The elevator takes some getting used to.”
Terry McGurn, Reston, Va.

“I think I liked them the other way.”
Eric Slade, Portland, Ore.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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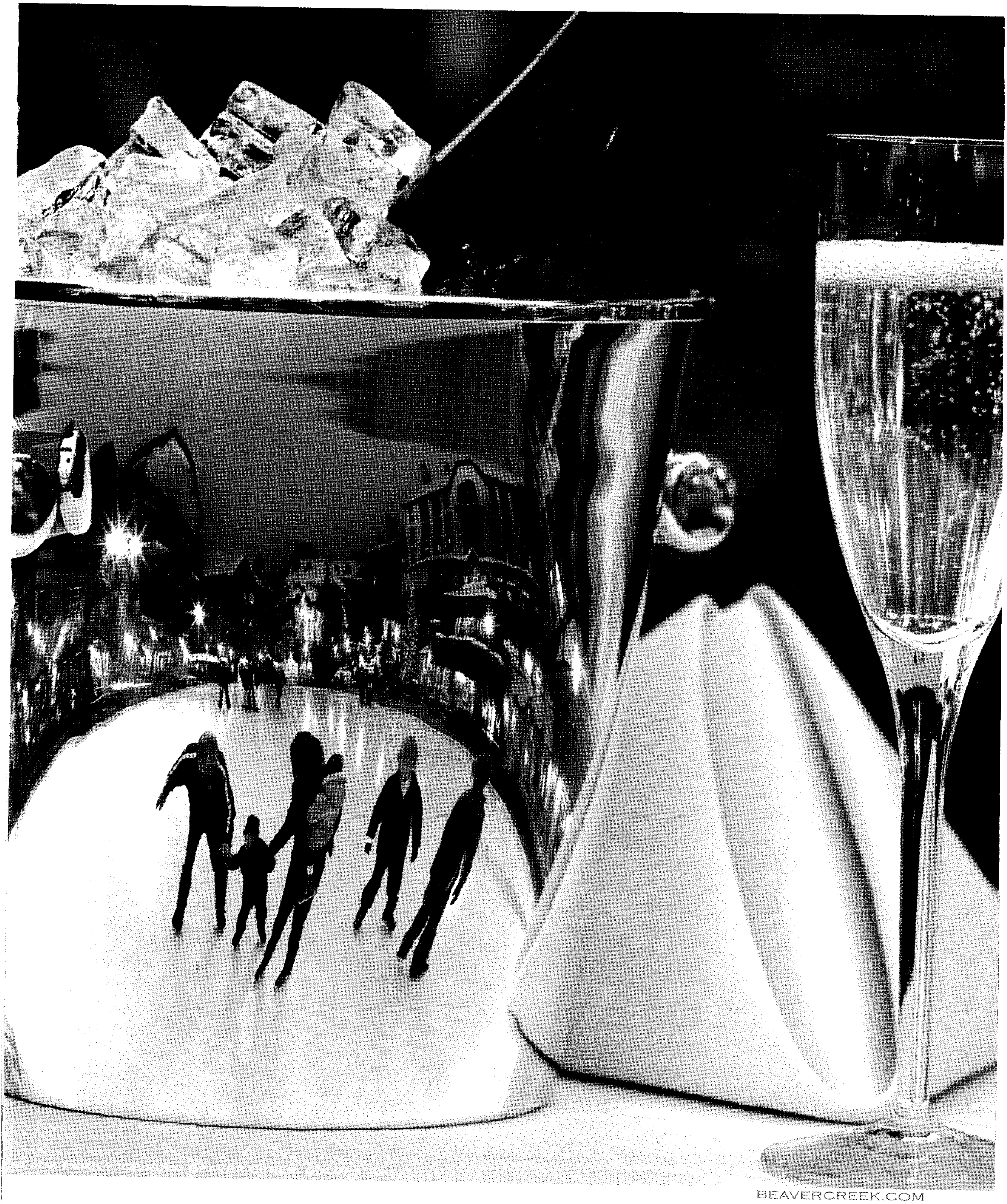
How THE OTHER HALF CHILLS.



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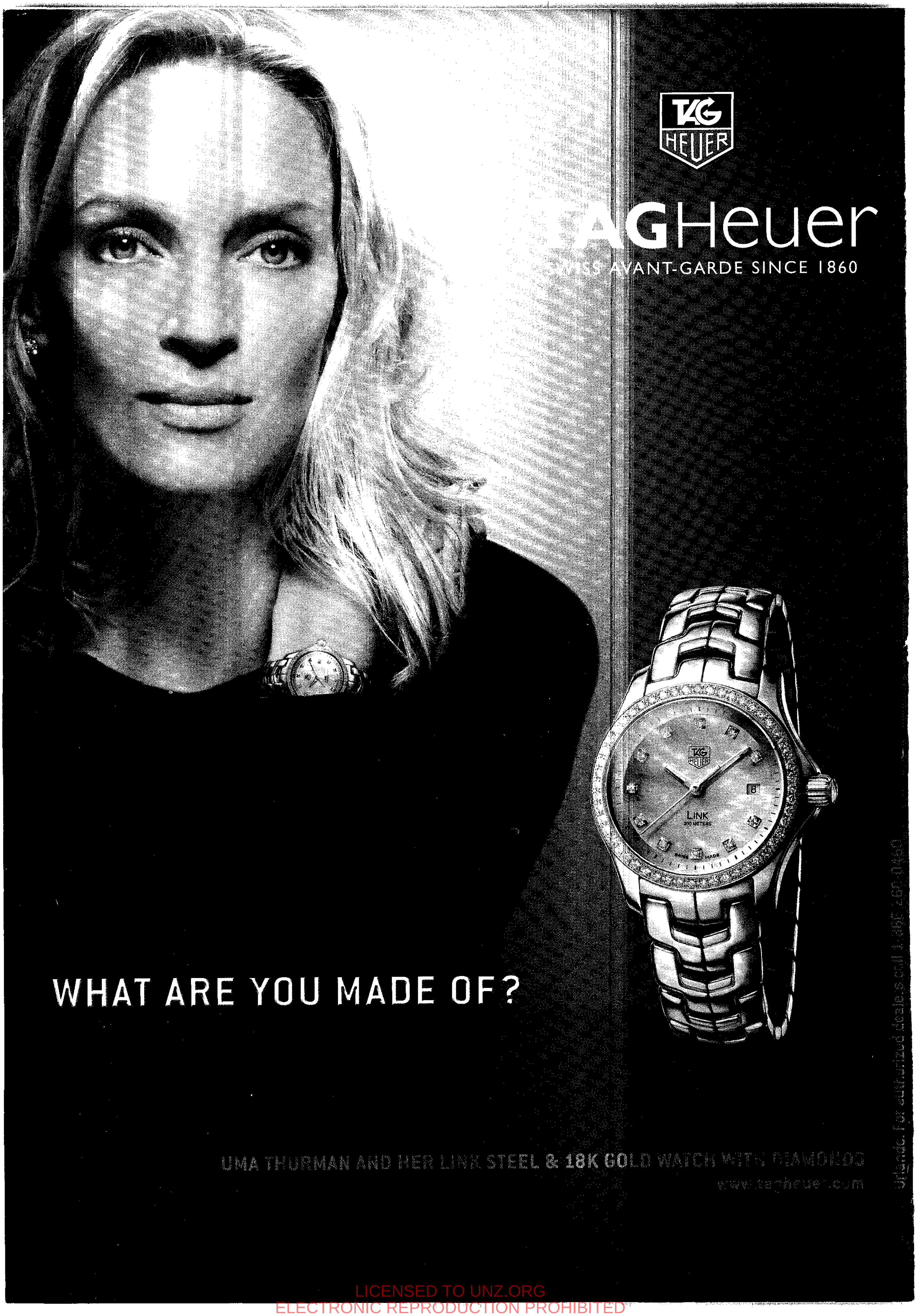
Beaver Creek. *Not exactly roughing it.*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